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RELIGION AND THE ENIGMA OF WATER

All over the world people have at all times attached a wide variety of religious meanings to water and the permanent uncertainties and flux of the hydrological cycle. Systematic comparisons of the role of water in different religions has therefore a great untapped potential: (a) water is an absolutely essential resource in all societies, (b) most religions give water a central place in texts and rituals, (c) the paradoxical natures of water – it is a life-giver and life-taker, alluring and fearsome, creator and destroyer, terribly strong and very weak, always existing and always disappearing – mean that it easily can be, and often has been, ascribed all sorts of different and conflicting symbolic meanings of fundamental importance at a number of shifting levels,[1] (d) the profound epistemological and ontological consequences of the fact that water is both nature and culture, since the thunderous liquid in a waterfall is the same water that is piped through cities; an inherent duality that highlights the importance of addressing how and why specific characteristics are attributed to different types of water, and underlines the fact that there is no mechanical, monocausal relationship between practical water experiences and religious water metaphors, and (e) to a greater extent than for other aspects of nature we can reconstruct long time-series of regular patterns and 'dramatic events' for water in ecological contexts because of water's ability to leave 'footprints' in the landscape, and because precipitation and river discharges have been of pivotal political and economic importance in the histories of most societies. In spite of the characteristics of water and its role in rituals and cosmologies, water has been given a peripheral place in research on religion.

A CRITIQUE OF TWO TYPES OF REDUCTIONISM IN COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF RELIGIONS

Comparative studies of religions have quite a long history, but comparative and in-depth studies of water in religions have almost no history at all. This is, as this book shows, expected and natural, given the questions, concepts and analytical approaches that have dominated social sciences in general and this field in particular.

The historical and sociological study of religion has been heavily influenced by Max Weber and his *The Sociology of Religion* (Weber 1963 [1920]). Weber's influence was so strong because in an important sense his work represented a paradigm shift for the modern comparative study of religion. He analysed religion with other questions than the theological in mind and shaped what was later called the cultural-historical school. Weber's ambitious studies of religious traditions attempted to determine why certain cultures had evolved specific economic and social systems, and the role played by religion in that process. However, his impressive studies were reductionist in one important aspect: Weber proposed a research approach that was not interested in, or even disregarded, how religions were influenced by other 'situations' (his term) than those related to economics and the social, so ecology, and our experiences of ecologies or different waterscapes and water-society relations, were left outside of his empirical and analytical picture (Weber 1963 [1920]: 13).[2] The growing influence of Franz Boas and other anthropologists of culture and religion moved the focus of research further from the potential impact of geographical contexts and ecological experiences on religious texts and rituals (for example, Boas 1911 and Frazer 1922). Human cultures were regarded as self-contained, though interdependent, totalities, and in order to understand beliefs and rituals research should concentrate on revealing the workings of the human mind or minds that had produced the texts or rituals in question. The more theologically oriented traditions within the study of the history of religion have for obvious reasons not been particularly interested in how mundane, practical issues such as ecological 'situations' or adaptations have influenced creation myths, the images of Gods or formative ideas about heavenly power.

The result has been that while the phenomenology of religion established types, patterns and morphologies, these were not understood as being in any substantive way influenced by the physical context in which religions developed or operated, or by how people conceived and experienced them. This way of thinking has led to research designs that basically have been uninterested in such questions in general and in specific water-society relations in particular. The widespread priority given to texts over popular rituals has tended to overlook the pious enthusiasm

for water and that rituals of 'the folk' all over the world have attached to religious acts and festivals in which water plays central roles (the water festivals in Asia in connection with New Year celebrations, the *Songkran* in Thailand, Epiphany in Christian-Orthodox countries, the *Rianovosti* in Russia, the *Makar Sankranti* in India, the *Pesach* in Judaism, dragon boat racing in China, and many, many more examples). The analytical approach proposed here, to study comparatively water systems and water-society relations and how they have evolved and been changed over time, does not restrict itself to those 'cultural' or psychological 'situations' on which Weber focused, but opens up the intepretative universe; it includes ecological contexts, situations and practices as well. By urging systematic comparisons of the views and practices of individual religions regarding the relationship between water, God and human beings we may also come to understand other similarities and differences between religions. By comparing these ideas and practices with the water-society relations and systems in which they developed, we might also obtain a better understanding of the complex interconnectedness between natural contexts and religious ideas in general.

I will in this chapter argue for the usefulness of the water-system approach in comparative research on religion, religious texts and religious practices in general. The proposal does not suggest reducing religious sentiment to impressions of admiration and wonder for water or claiming that water is or has to be an essential element in the conceptions of the divine. Sacred ideas should be distinguished from profane ones because they are of greater intensity, but also because they have qualities which other types of ideas do not have. The point here is trying to make sense of an empirical fact: most religions, but not all, give water a central but different place in the texts and rituals, in the past and today. Why is this so, and how can this be studied and what can such studies tell about religion in general?

Comparative studies of 'water in religions' may also help to liberate research from a certain normative hesitancy related to whether comparisons of belief systems are legitimate. Since water in most religions seems to be conceived of in more or less the same way, the idea that each religion is an organic whole with its own inner coherence, solely culturally determined by particular traditions, and therefore not comparable with others, must be qualified. With water as an entry point one might argue exactly the opposite – the both apparent and real similarities and differences in how religions conceive of water make comparative research useful and possible. One might extrapolate and focus on notions or beliefs about water because such notions are so common. Since water is such a widespread medium of myths and symbols, it is also easier to omit what has been described as a common problem in religious studies; that of applying one's own

criteria of logicality and intelligibility to other belief systems and their corresponding criteria. We do not have to translate what is unfamiliar into what is familiar, since the different religions' orbits meet here, at the confluence of water, society and religion. A focus on the mundane water issue might therefore further a plural, cross-cultural approach to the study of religion. Water can function as a 'neutral', common ground, stimulating research on other and more contested areas. The study of ancient religions has long since been dominated by textual scholarship, which has given priority to the different text traditions,[3] but comparative studies of water in both rituals and texts might bring forth not only supplementary evidence but different perspectives.

CREATION MYTHS, GODS AND THE ROLE OF WATER

A better understanding of the creation myths requires research that breaks out of that kind of reductionism that looks only at social variables. Why was life according to the creation myths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam made possible when water mixed with clay, while in China life became possible when water was removed from the clay? And why, in pagan Norse religion, were there few, if any, ideas about the role of water in the creation of the world, and why was the Mayan religion's emphasis on water different from all of them?

Abrahamic religions share the basic ideas about water and God – God created the world and Man from water; God punished Man by water; and God's Paradise was a place defined by enough running water. The Old Testament and the Qur'an contain many passages in which fresh water is described as a gift from God and as a means of punishment. The Bible does not speak explicitly about the water of life but of God's river which waters the earth and creates nourishment and well-being: 'Thou visiteth the earth and waterest it, thou greatly enrichest it; the river of God is full of water; thou providest their grain, for so thou hast prepared it' (Psalms 65: 9). God, or Yahweh, is described as a fountain of living waters (Jeremiah 2: 13), and his blessings are compared in a variety of ways with the blessings of water: 'He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul' (Psalms 23: 2–3). And: 'thou givest them drink from the river of thy delights. For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light' (Psalms 36: 8–9). The opening incident in the Bible is man's loss of the tree and the water of life. The closing incident in the Bible is his regaining of the tree and the water of life (Frye and Macpherson 2004: 36).

Allah is described in much the same terms, and even 'His Throne was upon the Waters – that He might try you, which of you is best in conduct.' (Sura 11: 7) The Qur'an asks why people refuse to listen to Allah: 'And do

they not see that We do drive Rain to parched soil, and produce therewith crops, providing food for their cattle and themselves? Have they not vision?' (Sura 32: 27). And moreover: 'It is God Who sends the Winds, and they raise the Clouds: then does He spread them in the sky as He wills, and break them into fragments, until thou seest Rain-drops issue from the midst thereof: then when He has made them reach such of His servants as He wills, behold, they do rejoice!' (Sura 30: 48). The name of the Islamic law, Sharia, means literally 'the path that leads to the watering place', that is, Sharia is the source of life; just as the watering places solve the practical problems of the Bedouin, Islamic law solves the problems of life and society.

In the Qur'an, metaphors about water are used to symbolise Paradise, righteousness and God's mercy. From the numerous references to cooling rivers, fresh rain and fountains of flavoured drinking water in Paradise, it is clear that water is the essence of the gardens of Paradise. The believers will be rewarded by 'rivers of unstagnant water; and rivers of milk unchanging in taste, and rivers of wine, delicious to the drinkers, and rivers of honey purified' (Qur'an 47: 15). The water in Paradise is never stagnant; it flows and rushes: 'In the garden is no idle talk; there is a gushing fountain' (Qur'an 88: 11–12).

Canonical, religious texts from many cultural areas underline the centrality of water in religious world-views and rituals. The Sanskrit text *Mahāābh ārata* (12.198: 14–19) summarises its general position: 'The creator first produced water for the maintenance of life among human beings. The water enriches life and its absence destroys all creatures and plant-life.' In the Puranic theory of creation, the Svayambhu (self-born creator) created water first. The old texts stated that primordial man was lying down in the waters of the universe (Sharma and Kanna 2013). In the book of Genesis it is said: 'In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground – then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.' (Genesis 2: 4–7). It was water that created the Garden of Eden, and it was the rivers running out of Eden that created the world for mankind. The Islamic story of the Creation has much in common with that of the Old Testament, and water permeates many aspects of Islam. The Qur'an states: 'We are made from water every living thing' (Qur'an 21: 31), and 'And Allah has created every animal from water: Of them there are some that creep on their bellies; some that walk on two legs; and some that walk on four' (Qur'an 23: 45), and he has ordained that all his created organisms

will depend on water for life (*Qur'an Ayats* 24: 25). Although Yahweh, God and Allah created life by water, punished the human race by water in the form of devastating floods or droughts, and rewarded the believers with water in the afterlife in the form of a Paradise full of running streams and green watered pastures, and although ideas about water are central in creation stories and in narratives about 'the end of the world' in almost all known religions, there are surprisingly few comparative studies on water in religion.

Water seen as God's medium allows devotees to express and explain numerous and often incommensurable concepts of the world and the cosmos, and this cannot be explained, I will suggest, without studying and acknowledging the waters' varying physical capacities. The cultural history of the world has an immense pantheon of gods associated with water, and this must reflect not only the fact that water is universal in societies but also that it always manifests itself differently. Religious rituals involving water are also countless, and water rituals have been intricately interwoven with religious practices and profane activities throughout history. In all major world religions water is used to remove evil, to purge sins, to protect against future misfortunes and to enliven the spiritual dearth of everyday life. In many societies (but importantly for comparative studies, not in all), water has been seen as a force that cleanses the sins of devotees, be they Hindu pilgrims bathing in sacred rivers, Christians being baptised or Muslims performing their daily ablutions. The Qur'an describes ritual cleansing, the *faraid al-wudu*, in this way: 'When you come to fulfil the prayers, wash your faces and your hands as far as the elbows, and rub your head and your feet up to the ankles' (Qur'an 5: 6). Performing such rituals generally presupposes a certain degree of impurity in the practitioner, which must be overcome before or during ritual procedures, and purification with water as a neutralising force is what is needed. In the Bible, cleansing is very important: 'They shall wash their hands and their feet, lest they die: it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him [Aaron] and his descendants throughout their generations' (Exodus 30: 21). Rituals may differ in form but the essence of the use of water is fundamentally the same: it is seen as carrying away both physical and symbolic impurity related to sin and defilement, and to the erasing of sin and the preparation for life after death (e.g., Parry 1985, 1994; Douglas 1994; Hertz 1996; Lehtonen 1999; Oestigaard 2005).

It is thus an undeniable fact that the physical, watery environment is often conceived of as a holy and cosmological landscape invested with divine meanings, where the profane and economic spheres are interwoven with the sacred. Rivers or bodies of water, for example, often have the role of marking the end of the profane and the start of a divine journey. Since the time of Pharaonic Egypt, it has been a common conception in

many religions that on those who were immersed in water were bestowed divine qualities and grace. Also in ancient Indian religions dowsing oneself with water was a purifying action, while in Sri Lankan Buddhism, merely to look at water was sometimes considered to be cleansing. In many religions, bathing symbolises rebirth; it is a method of renouncing one's former self, but in other religions bathing has no religious value.

Water is also in general the medium whereby gods or God prove themselves or reveals that they are the god that they claim to be. The centrality of the rain gods in the religions of most traditions testifies to this fact. An impotent or powerless god will not be obeyed and worshipped, even if he or she is strictly speaking still a divinity, and the power of the gods is often measured through their ability to provide humans with life-giving waters in the form of rivers and rain (McKittrick 2006). An early and striking testimony of water's ability to prove the power and legitimacy of divinities is recorded in the Old Testament, where the cosmic drama and battle between the Jews and the worshippers of Baal unfolded on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18: 16–45; Tvedt 1997: 85). Jahve proved to be the God who could control the water, a very important reason to choose him rather than Baal. Although the gods may exist ontologically regardless of their interaction with humans on earth, devotees have often perceived it to be the other way around. Water is also regarded as the primary materialisation of Vishnu's *mâyâ* (energy), and as a clear manifestation of the divine essence (Sharma and Kanna 2013), but very different from how Jahve manifested himself on Mount Carmel.

The procurement and control of water have to a much larger and more fundamental extent than the control of other aspects of nature been regarded as a divine project. In many religions the cosmos itself is created from water, at the same time as its role is described in different ways. In rainmaking rituals, this relationship between gods and humans takes a slightly different form. If the seasonal rain does not come when it should, the gods are invoked in the modification of nature for the creation of life-giving waters. Rainmaking rituals are rites where humans sacrifice to the gods for the return of water for a successful harvest and further life. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, Mother Earth is a servant of God, and she is pleased when God is being worshipped. Rain, which produces all living things, is a result of the performance of ritual duties as taught or prescribed in the Vedic scriptures (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.14–15). The supreme powers of the gods are expressed by their divine control of water, which guarantees people's well-being and governs their life and their death by its presence or absence. A comparative study of water control as a divine project has, in spite of its importance, not yet been undertaken.

The scope of comparative research on people's relation to water and religion is so wide since water in religion symbolises or expresses the whole

of human life in its various stages, but in different ways. Such studies should take as a starting point the fact that in some cases water in its original form is procreative: everything has its origin in and stems from water. Metaphors of creation and cosmogony have often obtained their strength and rationale in aquatic symbols where water has been experienced or conceived of as a procreative force and the essence of all kinds of life. In Christian baptism the initiate dies in the water by immersion and arises from it as reborn in the kingdom of God, while the precise role and description of water varies in different denominations. Rivers are often important symbols in religions, but not always, and again – in different ways. They symbolise the crossing-point between the living and the dead in the Pharaonic and Greek religions, but not in Christianity and Islam, In Hinduism, meanwhile, the river provides the mythical path leading to Nirvana, which is why the ashes of the dead should be scattered in a holy river. Running waters are often imbued with certain powers and qualities in the form of a spiritual or physical substance (Marriott and Inden 1974, 1977). In Hinduism, Ganges or Ganga is the Mother Goddess, and as such the water with its life-giving capacity is perceived and worshipped as a divinity (Darian 1978; Eck 1983; Feldhaus 1995; Oestigaard 2005). Ganga is the ideal holy river because she is the supreme goddess who may be used for every purpose; she is not only associated with the divine, but *is* the divine; she is not only worthy of spiritual respect, she *is* spiritual. There is no river like Ganga in Christianity, Islam or Judaism, although the Jordan was considered a holy river but in very different ways.

When comparing water's role in rituals it is important to consider aspects like the following: in Christianity, the water employed in baptism is not perceived as a divinity, but as consecrated water (Beasley-Murray 1962; Harper 1970). Although God transfers spiritual and divine qualities into this water through consecration by priests, the sacred powers are limited and defined for a certain purpose and time. Both types of water are within the realm of the holy, but their qualities and internal capacities differ. Ontologically, there is a fundamental difference as to whether the river *is* a divinity, as with Ganga, or whether the divinity transfers healing or blessing power *to* the water, as with the waters in the grotto in Lourdes. In Judaism, the 'living waters' do not represent an embodiment of Yahweh, but they do have spiritual qualities that allow humans to come closer to God. In Islam, the water of the Zamzam spring is Allah's own water; he made the water run in the middle of the desert by sending the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) there.

Water may be used as a point of entry for the clarification of differences between the holy and the sacred, and the divine and the sacred in new ways, since water is used for so many different purposes and in so many ritual connections. Even more so because despite all these different

qualities in divine revelations and manifestations through water, in structural terms there are certain concepts that seem to recur in the beliefs and rituals associated with this element in nature and society. How are we to explain the importance of such similarities and differences, and how can we move beyond the isolation of certain elements of similarity to explore the deeper meaning and contexts of these similarities? The functional roles and forms taken by water in rituals have changed, and its use and how it has been conceived of therefore need to be analysed from a historical perspective.

In spite of a growing interest in aspects of water and religion, there are still relatively few scholarly works that attempt to provide analytical and general description of the role played by water in different religions, or of how water has been conceptualised and perceived at different times in different religions. Some studies have offered useful summaries of religious texts and quotations dealing with water,[4] but so far, none have dealt with the overall role and understanding of water in the different religions,[5] integrating analyses of texts, rituals and historical changes in the role and understanding of water in belief systems and religious practices. Although interesting studies have been published about aspects of water in different religions (Oestigaard 2013; Faruqui, Biswas and Bino 2001; Blair and Bloom 2009), we still lack comprehensive studies of 'Water in Christianity' or 'Water in Islam' or 'Water in Buddhism' or 'Water in Taoism' that integrate such textual and ritual analyses within a long historical and broad geographical perspective. There are studies of individual water rituals as in Lourdes and in Benares in India, but the bathing of Hindus in the Ganga or Christian baptism in water, or the fact that millions of Muslims bring water back home in plastic bottles from the Zamzam Well in Mecca every year, cannot be analysed by studying the history or the functional roles of these rituals in isolation, but must be related to textual analysis and differences in time and space between the waterscapes and water traditions within which the believers have lived. In a globalised world there is an even greater need – in order to provide a common ground for communication – for studies that systematically compare different religions, attempting to explain similarities and differences among ritual practices and textual narratives of core views. What are the preconditions for the co-existence of various concepts of holy or sacred water, of different water rituals, and of different conceptions of the role of water in the creation of the world? Water as an entry point provides a rare opportunity to study such symbolisms universally as components of religion and mythology, but at the same time within the confines of each individual religion.

Within the Jewish-Christian and Islamic traditions the notion of God's control of rain plays a central role. Rain can in fact be understood

as the material symbol of the covenant with God. So long as the Israelites heeded the law, they received rain in reward. Or as it is written: '"though thou wast angry with me, thy anger turned away, and thou didst comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12: 3). The belief was that rain came from a great reservoir of water in the sky. It was God who controlled its release. Drought was therefore interpreted as punishment. By confessing one's sins one could placate Yahweh. It was only a placated God who would guarantee enough water for animals, wells, agriculture and extensive cleansing rituals.

The religion of the Vikings that for centuries dominated the belief system in the north-western part of Europe, gave water, however, a very different place in its cosmology. The Vikings' ideas about the creation of the world, about the origins of mankind, of paradise and the power of the gods were complex and fascinating (Steinsland 2005), but had no links to ideas about the holiness of water.[6] Here will be given a short description of their cosmology to show how different from the world religions it was in its conception of the place of water in the scheme of things, implicitly suggesting this should be interpreted as representing a mythical and religious reflection of the water-society relations of the Eurasian raincoast.

From the *Voluspá*, or the 'Prophecy of the Seeress', which was composed around the end of the heathen period, and the 'Gylfaginning' ('The Deluding of Gylfi'), which is the first part of Snorre Sturlasson's *Edda,* written in the thirteenth century, and paraphrases the older stories, and a number of other sources, one can derive an account of events as follows: in the beginning there was neither earth nor heaven. There was nothing except the great void, called Ginnungagap. This lay between two areas. One was freezing cold and foggy, and was called Niflheim. From Niflheim a river flowed into the void, where it froze into layer upon layer of ice. The other area was red-hot and was known as Muspelheim. At the point where the frost and the heat met there came into existence the first of the giants, called Ymir, and together with him a cow called Audhumla. While Ymir slept, his legs copulated with one another, and begat a son who became the ancestor of all the other giants of the earth. Meanwhile, Audhumla licked the salt off a stone. From this there sprang a human figure, Buri, who sired a son named Bort, who in turn sired sons who were called Odin, Vile and Ve. These three killed Ymir and created from his body the earth and the heavens. His bones became cliffs, his skull the sky, his blood the sea, and so on. Sparks from Muspelheim gave rise to the sun, the moon and the stars. The gods created the first man and woman, the first human beings, from some wooden sticks which they had found.

Ragnarok, or the twilight of the gods and the end of the world, would happen when the world was consumed by fire.

The south – that is, where fire and warmth came from – was associated with life. From the north came the rivers. These symbolised ice and lack of life. Yggdrasil – an ash tree – was at the centre of the cosmic system. In the Nordic creation myth the dramatic moment occurred with the meeting of fire and ice. Ymir was not created from precipitation or rain; life did not arise from flowing water, but at the point where heat met frost. Mankind was not moulded from the earth to which a god had added water, but was created instead from two wooden sticks. Paradise is not described as an area drenched in water. In Valhalla, where Odin gathered his chosen companions, the more important thing was mead. The end of the world does not arrive in the form of a deluge, as it does in Buddhist, Sumerian and Christian conceptions, but as fire and with the destruction of a tree. The lack of a flood myth and the marginality of water stand out as two of the most significant features of the Norse cosmogony, a feature that has been largely overlooked in research because this aspect of the belief system has not been systematically compared. In Scandinavian mythology, water as such had no holiness attached to it, and it was not a medium of the gods. It was a substance that could hide wisdom and spirits, but it was not itself spiritual.[7]

The Mayan religion in Meso-America should also be briefly discussed, since it has its own peculiar relationship with water. Mayan evocations of water deities are numerous and are always present in their iconography, their temple architecture, as well as in their rituals and written history. Water was one of the governing forces, as well as being the main sustaining structure of the world (Florescano and Velazquez 2002; Ruiz and Licea 2010). The divine condition of this element and the fact that it was understood as a symbol became a powerful way of understanding and cognitively expressing the world. Water became a central means of communication for Mayan communities, since gods and men could understand each other and come to sanctified agreements thanks to its divine essence. Their survival depended on this mystical dialogue about water. The God of Water proper, the giver of rain, was Chac, whose image is a human form with a huge hooked nose. The Mayas prayed to the god for the rain to be beneficial and to fertilise their harvests.

I will suggest that this religious belief system reflects the fact that Mayan civilisation was a rain-based agricultural civilisation, which stored rainwater in man-made reservoirs from one season to another. The Mayan heartland was a seasonal desert. The rulers of the Mayas were rulers whose legitimacy therefore largely depended on their god-like ability to maintain this water storage system and bring water or irrigation water to the farms. When the rains eventually disappeared in successive

droughts during the eighth century, the economy was devastated. But it also impacted fundamentally on the whole political-religious fabric and authority structure of the society, since it was the leaders who should be blamed. In many historical studies the disappearance of rain in the seasonal desert of the Mayan heartland has tended to be overlooked, because the search for factors that can explain the downfall has been restricted to social variables.

China presents also a particular case of the universal society-water nexus in religion. China is known for having no real dominant creation myth; it was, as Joseph Needham put it, rather 'an ordered harmony of wills without an ordainer'. But basically, human beings lived in an anthropocentric universe where the sages brought order out of an originally chaotic universe. The water world was controlled on a grand scale, although the Jade Emperor, the mythical Yu, according to Mencius, guided the water by imposing nothing on it that was against its natural tendency. In China – whose religious tradition is marked by a syncretic blend of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism – one of the most famous creation or flood myths deals with Emperor Yu. It is connected to the Xia Dynasty of the third millennium BC. It describes a cosmic battle between flooding waters and the sky, the later conceived of as a dome, separate from the earth. One day, water emerges from the land and begins to rise up towards the sky. Two figures appear, a father and a son. They attempt to stop the rising water and restore the land. Both are described as being fish-like or dragon-like. The father fails and so the son, called The Great Yu, works for nine years to control the water and to dig channels where the water can flow. After titanic efforts to control the waters the land could re-emerge and society could be built. Most modern interpreters of this myth will suggest that this is the archetypical description of the flooding of the Yellow River. Water is described as a kind of primeval, mysterious force that needs to be controlled for the sake of the living. The semi-human figures that teach humanity how to control it are themselves watery, fishy or dragon-like in appearance, yet fully human. In religious studies this myth is often categorised as a 'flood myth', but this labelling should rather be interpreted as a reflection of the scholarly influence of the Abrahamic tradition in establishing the most used analytical and mythical categories, also conceiving the Jade Emperor and the creation of China and the world in this perspective.

To what extent should the clear differences among these religions in the roles they ascribed to water be regarded as a reflection of different spatial experiences with this water? The descriptions of the role of water that we find in the Bible and the Qur'an clearly correspond to beliefs that were widespread in the first great river civilisations, and that developed in the hot, arid regions of the Middle East. Illustrations and stories that

survive from the times of Pharaonic Egypt tell how the priests already at that time were washing themselves before participating in ritual actions. Moses, whose name in Hebraic means 'he who came out of the river', and his people wandered around in the desert for 40 years according to the Bible, all the time dependent upon God's will to give them water, and Abraham's clan came from the valley of the Euphrates and Tigris, where both the Sumerian creation myths and flood stories focused on water. To what extent is the marginal role played by water in the creation story, in the end-of-time myths and in rituals in the Viking religions a reflection of the unique waterscape in north-western Europe, and of the fact that it was the religion that developed on the Eurasian raincoast? In Scandinavia and in Iceland there was more than enough water; in fact the problem was in general that there was too much of it, and the problem for the farmers was drainage rather than bringing water from rivers to desert sand as it rained all year round, if it was not actually snowing. In this context, water was conceived of as being less precious, and to dream of a Paradise of running water made no sense since in their earthly life the people were surrounded by running water day in and day out. And similarly, did the myth of the Emperor Yu gain its position precisely because the story reflected so well the experiences of the people on the Chinese plains, who had to adapt themselves to the recurrent, violent floods of the great rivers that now and then destroyed and drowned habitable land.

The point here is, of course, not to assert that there is a one-to-one mechanical and causal relationship between the ecology of the waterscape and the role of water in different religions. The world-views were developed in continuous interactions with the waterscape as part of a vivid and long-standing relationship. How much and to what extent such variables influenced belief systems and rituals is a task for future research to decide.

THE FLOOD MYTH – UNIVERSAL DREAMS OF URINATION OR REAL FLOOD(S)?

The myth of the Flood is probably the most studied of all myths. In the 1950s it was estimated that around 80,000 works in 72 languages had been written about Noah and the Ark alone. This astonishing level of interest is a reflection of the central place taken by the idea that God punished humankind with floods in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and many other traditional religions (Allen 1963; Leach 1969; Dundes 1988; Kramer and Maier 1989; Cohn 1996; Doniger 1998 and 2010).

The most dominant interpretation in the social sciences of these myths has been psychological, totally disconnected to any reflections

on waterscapes or water-society relations. Comparative research inspired by a Freudian approach has been particularly interested in the dream aspect of the flood myths. Flood myths were according to this analytical approach products of the psyche which emanated from a universal trait of the human soul. It was suggested that there was a connection between dream responses to the basic need to urinate during the night and the ubiquity of the flood myth. This perspective produced many scholarly articles and described the spread of the flood myth as a kind of retelling of such disturbing dreams. Others have given the myth quite another psychological explanation; they see it as a male chauvinistic or patriarchal dream. A masculine god rescues the world and makes a pact with a male survivor, or masculine hero. The claim is that it is a creation myth, modelled on, or formulated in response to, the 'female flood', that is, the 'water that flows' in connection with birth. Just as mankind is born of woman, so the world is created, or born of, man. It has also been seen as a metaphor – 'a cosmogonic projection of salient details of human birth insofar as every infant is delivered from a "flood" of amniotic fluid' (Dundes 1988: 1). These psychological and generalised interpretations of the flood myth take for granted that the myth and its story have been diffused (Dundes 1988: 2), and ignore the differences in the position that the myth has occupied in various religions, and in the character of the different doomsday conceptions in different mythologies. To advance our understanding of the flood myths it will therefore be fruitful to carry out further and more rigorous comparative historical studies of water-society relations and how they have evolved and been reflected upon.

The relationship between the much older Sumerian flood myth and the myths of the Bible and the Qur'an is now beyond dispute. Archaeologists have found evidence not just of one, but of many floods in the region, and it has been established that the deluges that affected places such as Ur, Kish and Uruk cannot all be dated to one and the same period. Most researchers believe that some of these floods resulted in serious destruction and made such a deep impression that they became an enduring theme in cuneiform literature. In the course of time, these different stories were transformed into the single story of the Great Flood. The prophets of the Middle Eastern monotheistic religions regarded the thought of an angry God who wanted to punish sinful mankind by cleansing the world and making a new start as an eschatological inundation. The waters sent by God would cleanse both land and people, wipe away faithlessness and plant a new spirit in the hearts of mankind. Water was duplicitous: both life-giving and threatening. It was the medium through which the gods could distribute blessings and punishments. 'I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life.' (Genesis 6.17)

Other civilisations also have flood myths whose narratives are reminiscent of that of the Bible. Around 300 comparable stories have been counted worldwide. The Hindu flood myth, although not associated with God's punishment, is reminiscent of the Jewish and Sumerian versions. The Lord of all Creation, Brahma, revealed himself in the shape of a fish to Manu, the first human of Indian mythology (as part of an Indo-European language, 'Manu' is related to our word 'man'), and told him of the coming flood that would destroy all things. He advised him to build a ship, and in the hour of danger to go on board, taking with him corn which could be sown in the earth. Manu did as the god advised and harnessed the ship to the fish. Guided by the god, he eventually landed on the highest peak of the Himawan Mountains, where, in accordance with the god's promise, he came to rest. When the flood receded, Manu offered sour milk and butter to the waters. A year later, a woman was born who was called 'Manu's daughter'. Together the two of them rescued the human race. In Hinduism as in Buddhism there is no ultimate destruction or dissolution. It is a continuous cycle of creation, dissolution and recreation from the dissolved condition. The whole cycle in these religions resembles of course the seasonal pattern of birth and destruction that has been so characteristic of 'Monsoon Asia' and where the floods have tended to be very destructive, setting land under water for weeks and months on end, but at the same time being necessary as the beginning of the next growing season. One explanation for these differences must be sought in two aspects of the physical waterscape and their relevance to societies: the floods were a regular, annual phenomenon in Monsoon Asia, sometimes being very destructive but with everybody knowing that things would revert to normal 'next year'. The Sumerian cities had developed not only by adapting to the natural variability of the rivers' water (as for different hydrological reasons was the rule in the Hindu cultural area) but by controlling it and even channelling it. A great flood was therefore much more destructive in Sumer, attacking so to speak the very heart of the society's achievements and economy, and it was therefore more logical to intepret water's destruction as punishment of the people by an angry god.

In Norse mythology there is no flood myth like those which are found in the Bible, the Qur'an or the Epic of Gilgamesh. Forty days and 40 nights of continuous rain were fairly normal for the people living on the Eurasian raincoast also in the time of Odin and Thor, so torrential rainfall in 40 days could not be interpreted as the end of the world. 'Ragnarok', the Norse 'end-of-the-world' story, was preceded by three terrible cold winters and the Sun, fighting a desperate struggle, was eaten by the wolf Fenrir. The Japanese Shinto religion had neither the concept of the world coming to an end nor an idea of a global disaster in the form of a great

flood. In the Pharaonic religion of Egypt water played a very central role, but there was no story of a deluge that destroyed everything.

Some researchers (and creationists) have been looking for a general world-wide inundation caused by rising sea levels as the explanation to the centrality of the flood myths – that there was one global flood event as the background to them all. It is argued that the assumed consistency among flood legends found in distant parts of the globe indicates that they were derived from the same origin. Others have promoted the hypothesis that flood stories were inspired by a kind of observation of seashells and fish fossils in inland and mountain areas (Mayor 2011). But as has been indicated, neither the Egyptians nor the Vikings had a flood myth, and the flood myth of the Hindus was very different from the myth of the Gilgamesh Epic. There are more than 500 myths known to us that portray a flood in some way, and they do it in highly diverse ways. It is more natural and logical to see these as stories told about real floods that happened in the past along different river basins, often dramatically affecting the lives of people who had settled on the riverbanks.

The recent trend of looking for changes in sea level as the background to these myths is not very fruitful but speculative. Authors have started to discuss whether Plato's story about Atlantis actually happened (Castleden 1998). Some have suggested that the story might reflect that the geography of old Mesopotamia was considerably changed after the last Ice Age when the sea level rose and filled the Persian Gulf with water. Another hypothesis is that the meteor or comet, which supposedly crashed into the Indian Ocean around 3000–2800 BC, created a giant tsunami. There has also been speculation about a devastating tsunami in the Mediterranean Sea, caused by the Thera eruption, but research has indicated that this had a local rather than a regionwide effect. It has been postulated that the deluge myth in North America may be based on a sudden rise in sea level caused by the rapid draining of prehistoric Lake Agassiz at the end of the last Ice Age, and one of the latest hypotheses about long-term flooding is the Black Sea deluge theory, which argues that a catastrophic deluge happened about 5600 BC when the Mediterranean Sea flooded into the Black Sea. Many of these events may have happened, but these localised floodings cannot explain the actual distribution of the flood story and most likely the chronicles of the first civilisations would have mentioned such extremely dramatic events.

In the era of emerging agricultural civilisations in dry valleys dominated by violent rivers, it is more natural to look for the actual ecological background to such stories in the imbalances of water-society relations at the time. Many of the excavated cities of classical Mesopotamia, where the legendary walls of Uruk and Shurrupak were created on the banks of the Euphrates, present evidence of flooding, but at

different times. Archaeologists have been searching for evidence of such a flood in Israel (Bandstra 2009: 59–62), but there is of course no such evidence of a widespread flood, because this area of the world did not have a flood-prone waterscape. No story of a deluge existed in Pharaonic Egypt, while there was most likely one in the Greek and Roman period, but the papyrus that contains it is damaged and unclear (Frankfort 1948; Budge 1989 [1923]: ccii).

If metaphors in religious texts are not to be seen simply as an ornament of language or as a controlling mode of thought expressing psychological mechanisms, then the flood myths can be interpreted as reflections of social experiences. In this case, the distribution and character of the waterscapes and the water-society relations must be part of the interpretation. The thesis would be that these flood myths emerged in countries with violent floods and marked differences between wet and dry months, but not only that: they were most important and punishing in areas where people lived along river systems and where they had developed the art of water control. Flood myths originally played no role in the apocalypse myths of people such as the Vikings, who inhabited regions of the world where rivers tended to run more or less all year round and where great floods were rare and never particularly serious and did not dramatically affect settlement patterns and economic activities. Neither did myths of a destructive deluge play any role in Pharaonic Egypt, where the yearly inundation was a blessing and they therefore had different flood myths, cultural-specific and reflecting the character of the regular and slow flooding of the river, nor did they in Japan, where floods were comparatively rare and modest in scope and destructive capacity.

Scholars have, of course, presented different theories about the relationship of flood myths to ecological experiences. Some have argued that the fact that so many tell the story of Noah must reflect some kind of societal considerations of experiences of an actual catastrophe happening on a global scale. Few, if any studies have on the other hand systematically analysed and compared the water-society contexts of the emergence of the different flood myths, integrating in the analaysis the ambivalence that water represented and symbolised for those who lived at that time and in those areas where the stories were first told and written down.[8]

My proposition is that in order to understand the flood myths and how they emerged and were diffused, and to shed new light on the relationship between geography or ecology on the one hand and myths and religious rituals on the other, comparative research on the character and relationship between ‘end-of-the-world-stories’, waterscapes and experiences with different waters would be fruitful. These myths should definitely not be treated simply as synonymous with the illusory. Their dual naure is based on a past reality and, pointing to deep experience, the

threatened destruction and the hope of renewal reflect both the character of an actual flood and the character of water in real life, but a character that is more prominent in some places than in others. This ambivalent power is what the theologian Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the water 'mysterium' that terrifies and fascinates and thus produces mythical stories. Do the myths then build on historical events or are they fictions? Was there really a global flood, as some scientists will argue, or are the story of Noah and all the other similar myths based on collective memories of real regional or local floods (Doniger 1998, 2010)? If there was a global flood, why then do not all religions have a flood myth of some sort? On the other hand, is the almost global occurrence of the myths due to their symbolic content rather than a shared experience, or are they widespread because floods are widespread?

The long traditions of comparative cultural and religious studies of the flood myths should be broadened and should integrate more historical data about hydrological conditions and existing man-made water modification structures. Based on compilations of historical data on climate, river discharge series, rainfall patterns as well as on water control measures and installations, no matter how rudimentary they are compared with modern achievements, the possibility of finding more definite answers to questions such as whether the different myths and doomsday stories were related to perceived history or experienced ecology, to fiction or to metaphor, would be greater. The flood stories and the natural and modified waterscapes and their roles in which they were told must also be analysed in wider textual contexts, since the drama of the stories and their meaning can only be properly understood as part and parcel of how the central relationship between divinities and water in general is described in the canonical texts of the religion concerned.

WATER AND THE RELIGIOUS 'BLAME GAME' OF ECOLOGICAL DISASTER

A focus on relationships between water and the divine can also make more general analyses of the ecological attitudes of world religions more precise and empirically rewarding.

When Lynn White Jr. published 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis' in *Science* in 1967, he initiated a very influential debate about religions and the ecological crisis. White argued that the Judaeo-Christian tradition must bear responsibility for this crisis, because of its dualistic view of Man and Nature, where Man stands above and apart from Nature, while men and nature in other world religions were part of the same web created by the Almighty. White ended up wanting to reform Christianity,

making Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology, and consciously attempting to construct an alternative Christian environmental ethic. Comparative studies of water and religion could shed new light on this issue.

Since White's seminal article quite a few studies have been published on the views of religions on nature and on ecology. Typical titles have been 'Is it too late? A theology of ecology' (1972), 'Ecological problems and Western traditions', or 'Can the East help the West to value Nature?' (1987). The Harvard Institute of Social Action on Religion's programme on religion and ecology is especially interesting in this context. What these impressive studies have demonstrated is that there are methodological problems involved in trying to 'identify and evaluate the distinctive ecological attitudes, values, and practices of diverse religious traditions, making clear their links with intellectual, political, and other resources associated with these distinctive traditions' (Tucker and Grim 1993: xxi). Ecology and nature have been defined in extremely broad terms, covering almost everything.[9] Typical questions within these traditions are therefore posed awfully broadly, exploring, for instance, the ways in which 'different religious perceptions and cultural values affect human beings' understandings of their relationships with nature, and their actions in and upon the natural environment' (Arnold and Gold 2001: xiii), or 'How do human beings in different cultural worlds think through and about their relationships with the natural environment in which they live, work, eat, pray, give birth, die' (Arnold and Gold 2001: xiv). The problem is one that will be discussed more in depth elsewhere in this book; such concepts and terms as 'nature' and 'ecology' are extremely broad and carry contradictory and unclear connotations, and have, moreover, different meanings in different cultures and religions. Additionally, no religion has similar attitudes to all aspects of the surrounding nature or ecology precisely because 'nature' and environment' mean things like animals, stones, water, sun, wind, plants, humans, and so on.[10] Using these terms as the basis for comparison and analysis makes it possible to argue in favour of all kinds of general conclusions, because it is always possible to find examples that illustrate or strengthen one's own arguments. This empirical and conceptual problem is aggravated by the fact that the question is deeply affective and motivational.

A focus on the role of water in comparative studies on religion is much more manageable; it is researchable. It will also falsify White's thesis, since the role of water in different religions undermines the general thesis about Judaeo-Christian traditions and the way these understand nature. In Buddhist and Taoist China, for example, the dominant stories deal with the manipulation of water on a really grand scale, and much more than in Christianity and Judaism. As the Chinese sage Lao Tze said about 3,000

years ago: 'The wise man's transformation of the world arises from solving the problem of water.' The Hindu literature has many more examples of humans trying to influence the gods to change the water landscape and precipitation patterns in man's favour than Judaeo-Christian texts. In the Qur'an, water is God's water, just as it is in the Bible. Man does not stand further 'above' water in the Bible than he does in the Qur'an or in the Baghavad. To the extent that man is aiming at controlling the watery nature within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, any claim that it is more geared towards mastery, taming and control than was the case in the old Egyptian religion, the Chinese religion or Islam cannot be sustained. Since water is such an important aspect of all ecosystems and of societies' relations to the environment, theoretical arguments of fruitful relevance about world religions' attitudes to nature must also be evident in attitudes to water. The theory or claim that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has a more instrumental relation to nature and thus also to water, or to water and thus also to nature cannot be sustained. There is a need for much more systematic comparative research on the whole web of practices, water festivals and water rituals, and on how water is described in texts and reflected in iconography to be able to formulate a precise thesis on these very important issues. Concentrating on water, as a single aspect of nature on the basis of methodological arguments about what can be studied and compared, could make comparative research on religion and nature more rigorous and controllable.

THE 'SECULARISATION' OF DIVINE RUNNING WATER

Water-society relations will also be a fruitful entry point to a better understanding of how rituals are affected when the ecological contexts of believers change – an issue of growing importance in a world of increased global migration and technological developments. Here two cases are briefly discussed: Christian baptism from the River Jordan to the Norwegain raincoast close to the North Pole and holy rivers in Hinduism from the Ganges to an industrial river in England.

Christian baptism is still described as the bath of rebirth, although baths in rivers are seldom involved in mainstream Christian rituals today. In Christian baptism, water plays a key role as a symbol of renewal and resurrection. Baptism in water is described and understood as the action whereby God helps the individual over from the worldly realm to that of his own Kingdom, from the world of sin and into the community of Heaven. The New Testament specifies that the baptismal ceremony is to be carried out in the name of the Holy Trinity, and that water is the element which serves as the medium.

It was St Paul who institutionalised Christian baptism with water, based on the example of John the Baptist and his baptism of Christ in the River Jordan. It is to him and the period in which he lived that we must look in seeking the origins and background of this ritual. In Palestine and elsewhere around the Mediterranean, water was a scarce resource and was therefore generally a highly valued symbol of life and divine mercy as discussed above, and as reflected very clearly in the Mikwah, the Jewish tradition. But these climatic factors are not sufficient to explain the nature of the ritual. In St Paul's time, an extremely popular cult of great influence throughout the Mediterranean region was that of Isis–Serapis or the Nile cult. This religion, a version of a much older Egyptian cult of Isis and Osiris (Anthes 1959; MacQuitty 1976), spread during the first century AD through Asia Minor and into Greece, and when it reached Rome in the course of the second century was a competitor with Christianity also in terms of the number of adherents it attracted. The cult became so popular that on several occasions citizens of Rome forcefully resisted decisions of the Roman Senate to tear down its temples. The extent of the cult's influence on early Christianity is still a matter of debate. Some reject the idea that St Paul's precepts concerning baptism are adaptations from this cult, yet there seems to be a growing consensus that they at least are strongly connected. Christian baptism is thus influenced by the great significance of sacred water in the region in general (Nile water and, later, Jordan water), but also by the old Jewish tradition of the bath of conversion, that is, the ritual bath which non-Jews had to take when converting to Judaism. According to a number of historical sources, in the first century baptism was supposed to take place in 'running water' or in a river. The ordinary apostolic mode of baptism was immersion, clearly representing death and burial with Christ, followed by a resurrection to new life with the resurrected Christ (Harper 1970). The descent into water and the rising from it corresponded to death and resurrection.

The question whether immersion is a necessary part of the ritual has of course been a long- and hotly debated and conflictual issue within Christianity. All agree that the essential feature of the ritual was water, but there has been disagreement about the mode of its use. Some argue that the insistence upon form contradicts the Scripture and the temper of the age of John, Jesus and Paul. Those who have argued in favour of a focus on the essential role of water more than its form have made the point that the ritual must be adapted to ecological circumstances and local waterscapes (Lambert 1903: 225; McGiffert 1897: 542). When Christianity expanded into north-western Europe, where water did not have an aura of holiness and where it also became more difficult due to climatic conditions to perform the bath, baptism changed.

It became less and less frequent for the baptismal ceremony to be held outdoors, even if this was the principal practice up to and during the fourth century. The first documented case of a new mode – that of affusion (pouring water over the head) – was around AD 250 (Russell 2001: 25).[11] Eventually, the ceremony moved indoors, and became confined to the churches. As Christianity expanded into northern Europe, affusion became the usual manner of administering baptism. By the thirteenth century, wetting had taken over as standard practice throughout the Roman Catholic Church, although for a long time it still remained important to use 'running water'. In Latin-speaking countries, and in those influenced by Latin culture and language, the baptismal stoup was usually described as the *fons*, or the font (cf. fount and fountain), in other words, it remained associated with the running water of a spring. The sacred quality of water was at that time still associated with the idea of it being in motion.

The importance of this idea of running water as the most holy is also demonstrated by the evolution of the baptismal font in the history of church construction. Initially the font was of a size that allowed the child to be fully immersed three times in the water. In the Middle Ages fonts generally had a hole in their base, which allowed the water to run out through the pedestal, through the church floor and down into the earth. The hole was plugged before the bowl was filled with water. After the ceremony the water was released into the earth, for having served in baptism it was considered to be so full of divine power that it would have been sacrilegious simply to throw it out with the slops. As immersion was gradually replaced by affusion, fonts grew steadily smaller, and it is now a long time since fonts were built with their own drain pipes. Nowadays, the water – still described in the actual ritual by the priest as divine – is tap water from the nearby kitchen or bathroom. The water itself is not in general seen as divine any more (although there are exceptions to this rule), but the language about the water in the ritual is the same as it has always been.

The content and symbolism of Christian baptism have clear historical roots and were originally influenced by cultural, economic and social relations between people and water in the Middle East. And with the spread of baptism to parts of the world where water conditions and temperatures are very different from those in the Middle East, a situation arose in which the significance and role of water also changed. Today's rituals are a distant and much transformed reminder of these 'foundational' circumstances. The role of water in the rituals changed as the waterscapes changed and what remained acquired an increasingly symbolic content and meaning.

In Hinduism the River Ganges plays, as we all know, a crucial role, and the notion of holy rivers is central in a great many rituals (see, e.g.,

Darian 1978). Some research has been done on ritual adaptations to holy rivers when they become dangerously polluted. When, at the beginning of 2000, this happened to the Bagmati, the holiest river in Hindu Nepal, as it was running by Pashupatinath in the capital Kathmandu, the believers were told not to bathe in the river but instead to take the waters in showers erected on its banks instead.[12] But what happens with these rituals when Hindus move away from their traditional holy rivers to new countries where the landscapes obviously do not have the mythical dimension that is ascribed to the rivers of the Indian subcontinent in the Hindu texts? Will the rituals change and, if so, how, or will the rivers at the new places where Hindus live be given a religious character, and how will these practices be religiously sanctioned and justified in the short and long run?

Bradford in the UK provides an interesting case. The River Aire is a polluted, industrial waterway that sluices through Bradford. This is an unlikely spot in the Hindu cycle of reincarnation. But the local Hindu population sought permission from Bradford City Council to turn the river into a 'symbolic' Ganges: a Ganges substitute. The Ganges flows more than 2,000 kilometres from northern India to Bangladesh. The River Aire comes into life north of Skipton in the Pennine hills and runs a mere 160 kilometres before it empties into the River Ouse. The idea was that a Hindu priest should pour a little water collected from the Ganges into the River Aire, and then the Hindus could scatter their ashes in what was directly described as a substitute river.

The important issue in this context is not that the Bradford City Council did not concur with the plans and initiative. The question is: how could this ritual be justified and ritualised by the devotees in relation to the River Aire? Water has a particularly great potential as a religious medium, also because, unlike ordinary relics, it can very easily be used to transport and diffuse holiness from one place to another. Since there is always so much of it, nobody – neither church nor priests – can totally monopolise the control of this symbol of the sacred or of holiness. It is possible to lock up fragments of relics guarded by officialdom, but the fluidity of water usually evades such attempts at control. Holy water is and has always been more accessible to the general population, and this must be one reason why water rituals in many situations have become a kind of 'people's religion'. It has been possible to infuse new meanings to new rituals because the rituals themselves can be performed outside the control of the religious hierarchy (also after the introduction of Christianity to Europe, the tradition of holy wells and holy water persisted long into the nineteenth century in most places, including England and Scandinavia, in spite of the fact that the practice was forbidden). To what extent will the process that was foreseen in Bradford be similar to earlier

developments in Asia, when Hinduism spread out from its birthplace and across the ocean to Indonesia, and how, for example, can the history of the establishment of Lake Manasarovar, far up in the highlands of Tibet – a very holy lake for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains – be reconstructed by studying Hindu texts, pilgrimage and the particular physical and social qualities of water?

What these examples show is that water myths and water rituals differ enormously from place to place in their morphological character but can still, at least partly, serve their social and religious functions. Water ideas and water rituals are not a 'closed' category with the same characteristics in different cultural areas or physical environments. There are a number of similar cases that have not yet been studied and that are therefore not yet properly understood.

MODERNITY AND HOLY WATER

The conventional and very powerful notion that nature idolatry is something belonging to the past or is gradually fading away in the wake of modernity is contradicted empirically by the role of water in contemporary society and belief systems. Never before have so many people taken part in religious rituals where the use of some form of holy water is at the centre of the rite. Millions and millions go to take holy water or holy baths, or to receive God by being baptised in water. Every year some 3 to 5 million people journey to Lourdes at the foot of the Pyrenees (Gordon 1996; Harris 1999). No other place in the Christian world, apart from Rome, receives so many pilgrims. They come from all over the world to this small French town with its holy spring and healing water. It became a place of pilgrimage after Bernadette, the young daughter of a local miller, saw the Virgin Mary creating a spring in the muddy soil. Every year millions of Muslims on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca go to the Zamzam Well, a water source miraculously generated by God. One story has it that God sent the Angel Gabriel who kicked the ground with his heel and the water emerged and Abraham's son was able to drink. Due to modern technology like plastic bottles and aircraft, believers can now easily take home the cherished water. India is the land of water pilgrims *par excellence*, not only in terms of tradition, but also because of the sheer scale involved. The most important festival is the Kumbh Mela, which is held every 12 years at the confluence of the Rivers Ganges and Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. During the last Kumbh Mela 120 million people gathered over 55 days, the largest congregation of human beings that the world has ever experienced. This mass of people came to the same place with one purpose: to bathe in the confluence of

the holy rivers. Within Christianity, Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing denomination, and one of its most central, distinguishing rituals is baptism with the Holy Spirit by immersion in water.

The sheer number of people who currently take part in rituals where water is at the very heart of them, makes comparative research on the religious meaning and role of water also highly relevant for understanding the religiosity of today's world. Few things reveal to a greater extent the notion that nature idolatry is something of the past, a modernist fallacy. This salient aspect of modernity must be explained by a combination of factors, but it must also take into consideration those qualities of water that have made it and still make it natural for humans to spin webs of significance around it in ways that no other element in nature can match. Taking water as a point of entry, let us study structural similarities and diverse empirical differences in religions in a rigorous, comparative way, which can contribute to making the study of religion a meeting ground of complementary methods. Comparisons of water systems and religions offer a unique opportunity for the integrated and comparative study of texts, rituals and practices, thus improving our understanding of the relationship between ecological contexts, religious ideas and dogma in general. Such research will also be of practical concern in countries that face serious challenges related to their water resources, assuming that religious beliefs and ideas about water have a bearing on attitudes to water management. Since many of the great civilisational and transboundary rivers are shared by believers of different religions, such as the Ganges, the Indus, the Donau, the Nile and the Mekong, the role of religious ideas about water is also a question of global and current, hard-nailed geo-political concern.