Water has always been held as sacred in all of the world’s religions. The current major religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism) lend it great importance.

In Judaism from the earliest times, the immersion ritual was symbol of regeneration and purity, a way of finding unity with original perfection. Also in early Christian baptism, the first act of a believer’s life was total immersion in and then reemergence from water, which had an extremely powerful meaning. Indeed it symbolized death and rebirth, the elimination of impurity and the guarantee of eternal life. Water is also one of the symbols used to represent the Holy Spirit. In early Christian art, the source of life surrounded by peacocks is the symbol of immortality. For Jews and Christians alike, the excess water sent by God in the Universal Flood was also a bringer of death. The Islamic religion has largely remained confined to an arid geographical area where water is considered a precious gift, divinely sent and which should be carefully managed. For Muslims too, ritual bathing is of great importance, because it gives a state of purity back to the believer. Cleansing and purification with water is scrupulously carried out before entering a mosque. According to Islamic teachings, no one can own or possess water since it is a divine gift. The Koran also states that whosoever pollutes water will be severely punished. According to Buddhism, water is a symbol of purity and in the Buddhist new year it is celebrated in a special rite. The Hindus, who also have a tradition of purifying immersion in water, believe the waters of the river Ganges are sacred, and although the river is currently polluted, they still believe in its powers for spiritual regeneration. But all this attention to water and belief in its intrinsic sacredness is actually much older than that linked to the main world religions of today.

From prehistoric times, humans venerated gods and goddesses of water, both agricultural and funerary, often with characteristics in common. For early humans the source of all life was the Mother Goddess from whose underground womb all living creatures were born. This Goddess was the goddess of the Earth or Nature itself, she who could give or take life and renew herself in the eternal cycle of seasons and water, from death to rebirth. The first evidence we have of this cult goes back to the Middle Paleolithic, which began about 100,000 years ago, when humans started using triangular tombstone symbols in stone (symbol of the female reproductive organs) and dug little cups into the stone to collect rainwater, life-giving fluid. From the upper Paleolithic on, or from 40,000 years ago, humans produced stone sculptures and rock engravings of animals and female figures. Whole vases or fragments found by archaeologists near to water sources in areas that are not easily accessible are evidence that these waters were probably considered sacred or magic, or that they had healing properties, if drunk in loco, perhaps also due to the mirror effect they produced. During the Neolithic period, alongside circular ditches found in caves, (perhaps linked to agrarian or funerary cults), there is archaeological evidence of ritual manifestations in the presence of water. These finds are located in particular near underground water, springs, or other very idiosyncratic or unique water sources, like those that are gaseous, sulphureus, or those full of residue that over time is transformed into stalactites and stalagmites. Later, during the Bronze Age, men tended not to consider still waters sacred so much as running water, a common symbol of purity.
From prehistoric times humans thought that the benefits of water were divine gifts or even that the water itself was a divinity: lakes, rivers, springs and glaciers became places of cult and were often given names charged with meaning that have survived to the present day.

“The wise man loves water”, so wrote the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse who lived during the IV century B.C. and who founded Taoism. For many civilizations and religions in the world, drinking water rather than alcohol is a sign of moderation and health because it is well known to many cultures how vital it is for water to be continually renewed in all living organisms. But the wise person also loves water because s/he can bathe in it, so absorbing an abundance of mineral substances, because it can be used for cleansing and thus purification, because it keeps sickness and bad moods at bay, and rejuvenates the body. One particular practice, frequenting places with thermal water, was very common in the ancient Mediterranean world, from the Romans to the Etruscans and other populations. According to the Greek philosopher Talet, water was the principle of life. He observed that all living creatures (and many inanimate objects) were made of water. And it is true that birds, reptiles and amphibians are born from eggs which are mainly full of water. Mammals too, before they are born, swim in their mother’s womb in a liquid composed principally of water.

In the Koran are the words “We have created every living thing from water”. In the Canticle of the Sun, St. Francis of Assisi praises God for water: “Praised be Thou, O Lord, for sister water, who is very useful, humble, precious, and chaste”. In many cultures, water appears as a reflection or an image of the soul. In Japan, water prefigures the purity and pliant simplicity of life. It can be both calm and animated, and the Japanese may contemplate the unruffled surface of a temple pond or make pilgrimages to waterfalls. The lotus-stream of the Buddha or Boddhisatava rises up from the waters of the soul, in the same way the spirit, illumined by knowledge, frees itself from passive existence.

During the Bronze and Iron Ages, the populations of Europe built numerous temples close to water sources. Many Christian sanctuaries too, often edified on earlier places of cult, are found by water springs which are held to have potent healing powers. Among the principal sanctuaries are the Marian shrines to the Virgin Mary: Lourdes in France, Loreto in Italy, Fatima in Portugal, Santiago de Compostela in Spain and Medjugorje in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Many ancient populations of Europe (the Celts, the Germanic, Baltic andItalic peoples, the Illyrians and Slavs) often used water springs as open air sanctuaries, or they built wooden or stone temples by them. Syracuse, for example, a Greek colony founded in 733 B.C., developed alongside the place where the fountain of Arethusa sprang forth in the peninsula of Ortygia, a place considered sacred where Arethusa, nymph of Artemis, daughter of Zeus, was supposed to live. The ritual or votive practice
of throwing objects of precious metals into rivers and lakes, or depositing them nearby, is a phenomenon which involved all prehistoric and proto-historic societies of Europe and coincides with the decline of cave water cults. This ritual lasted a long time, from about 3400 B.C. until the late Bronze Age (XIII-XII century B.C.). From the most recent archaeological research it appears that the weapons (swords, daggers, spears and hatchets) date principally back to the Bronze Age. Only as from the end of this period, from the Iron Age, do we find other artifacts like brooches, knives, razors, helmets, pruning knives, rings, small bronze sculptures and earthenware. In ancient Rome through which the Tiber (another deified river) flowed, the highest ceremonial state functions were inaugurated with sacrifices to Jove Liceus, “bringer of rain”, an appellation originally attributed to the Greek god Zeus. Again in Rome, the most important religious position, the Pontifex Maximus (literally “the best bridge builder”), takes its origin from a magistrate or priest in charge of water and the construction of bridges. Today this term is still used for the highest representative of the Christian world, the Pope.

Illustration 4: © Focus, Gruner+Jahr/Mondadori
Lourdes (France): bathing and ablutions in the waters that are held to have healing properties.

In Asia humans have always battled with continual and torrential rains provoked by humid winds, monsoons, which strike the countries of the Indian Ocean. To make them stop or lessen their intensity, the peoples of India turned to water gods. One of these, the Indian god Narayana, or “he who lives on the water” is one of the manifestations of Vishnu. According to the Indians, the creation of the Universe is perpetually reabsorbed by Narayana, and it is from him that all things are born again. The most important sacred river in India is the Ganges, and Hindus believe that their life is incomplete if they don’t bathe at least once in its purifying waters. It is also believed that by bathing in this sacred river one can be pardoned for sins and attain salvation more easily. Indeed, for Hindus, the waters of the Ganges can heal sickness and cleanse the soul of all its sins. Long journeys are carried out to throw the ashes of cremated family members in the waters, because they believe the soul will rise up from there to heaven. It is also held that the soul can go to heaven if you drink water of the Ganges, and, for this reason most Hindu families always keep a vial of its water at home. It is therefore not surprising that many sacred Hindu sites, such as Hardwar and Varanasi, are found along the banks of the Ganges. In China too, the sacredness of water can take on many forms. One curiosity worthy of mention are the highly unique water courses made by some Buddhist monks. The practice, called Shuishangpiao (“running on water”) in Chinese, is in reality a special martial art which requires great discipline and total concentration, as well as the ability to run on a series of lightweight wooden plates which float on the water. This practice demonstrates how the search for perfection can entail challenging the forces of nature, like water.

Illustration 5: © Anairo.it, Francesco Riva
Sunset on the river Ganges.

Illustration 6: © Focus, Gruner+Jahr/Mondadori
Ablutions on the banks of the Ganges.
In Africa, a hot and mainly arid continent, the great rivers Nile, Congo Niger, Zambezi and the Lakes Chad, Victoria and Rudolf, have always been life-giving. The ancient Egyptians believed their country was “a gift of the Nile” and they venerated the river as a deity. The early peoples of north Africa too venerated a water deity called Amon. This word, for the earliest inhabitants of the Canary Islands (the Guanches) and for the present day nomadic inhabitants of the desert (the Tuaregs), means “water”. For many populations of sub-Saharan Africa too, such as the Dogon of Mali, water is sacred and has the power to fecundate the earth.

The main deities of Egypt were all linked to the Nile. The god Apis, sometimes depicted as half man half woman, also represented the union of water, masculine element, and the earth, female element. Apis was often depicted with a vase from which water flowed that would fill the Nile until it burst its banks, refreshing the oases and vegetation with dew. Some of his other attributes like the lotus, canes and papyrus, were called “gifts of the Nile”. As a symbol of the fruits of inundation, Apis was often depicted bearing a rich offering of vegetables and two vases of water. In reliefs, he was often shown wearing the typical knotted loincloth of fishermen. Apis was venerated with great festivities in a bid for favorable floods although he did not have major shrines dedicated to him, rather small rock temples. His dwelling was a cave near the Nile.

In the Kabylia culture (a pre Islamic Berber people of Algeria) many water springs (taâwint) are sacred and as such host benevolent genies, (âssas) angels or highly honored saints. Frequented mainly by woman and children, the waters are often held to have curative properties, and are used for their salutary properties in healing rites. In sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the traditional animist societies (even where other religious influences have become superimposed over time), the relationship with water, the earth and the environment has a strong sacred dimension. This also explains the difficult passage in the second half of the twentieth century from the symbolic representation of water as “free”, because sacred, to the modern concept of rationalized, commercialized water, governed by water companies.

Long before the arrival of the Europeans, many magnificent civilizations like the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Inca flourished in America, cultures who held water to be bringer of both life and death. If on the one hand water was considered as a divine fertilizing force, it was equally associated with the kingdom of the dead. The culture and civilization of the North American Indians similarly developed in a state of harmony with nature.

This is what the red Indian chief Seattle had to say in a letter to the president of the United States, Franklin Pierce, in 1855: “This shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you land, you must remember that it is sacred, and you must teach your children that it is sacred and that each ghastly reflection in the clear water of the lake tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water’s murmur is the voice of my father’s father. The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes, and feed our children.
If we sell you our land, you must remember, and teach your children that the rivers are our brothers, and yours, and you must henceforth give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother”. These noble and profound sentiments, inextricably linked to the forces of nature, are ones we should rediscover today in a renewed awareness of our environment.

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