We all know the facts. 70% of the world is covered by water. And, as a dastardly Star Trek alien once observed, humans are “ugly bags of mostly water.” He was right, at least, in part—our bodies are 66% water. Water is essential to life, and often considered a basic human right.

The prevalence of water in our physical lives is mirrored in many spiritual perspectives. Some of the religious uses of water are depicted in this issue, though it is by no means exhaustive of them. We would be remiss to overlook the use of water in Buddhist funerals, or the water purification that occurs in the daily morning prayer and cleansing ritual in Hinduism. The primary symbol of Taoism is water. Generally, water serves as a representation of cleansing, health, and life.

Life, however, tends not to be the first word associated with water in recent days. It may interest you to know that the January Radix issue on religion and water was ready to print when tsunami waves collided with South Asian countries. Many of the words and images found here take on a new light when viewed in the context of this disaster.

Religious texts, too, take on new significance. The account of the great flood is common among many world religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have variations on the Noah’s Ark telling. Hinduism also has a flood story, as do many Native Canadian and American tribes. Narrow escapes by small groups of humans and the resurgence of communities following mass flooding are common elements in these tales. Also common is the sense one gets from these accounts that power greater than humanity does exist. As we are now painfully aware, something as life-giving and seemingly benign as water has the ability to also threaten and destroy life.

Ironically, the most immediate need for survivors of a disaster that involved an abundance of water is more water—clean water to drink and bathe with. If the significance of spiritual water is to be maintained, we must never forget about those who are perishing for lack of physical water. To this end, this issue of Radix also includes information on current local and international tsunami relief efforts. It is our hope that those who taste spiritual water will continue to feel responsible to help meet basic physical needs among all people.

Aimee Patterson Read

From the Editor’s Desk...
Water and Text

And the Lord will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

_The Bible, Isaiah 58:11_

Cool, Cool Water

I'm going down to the cool, cool water
Away from the raging fire
Away from the strife and slaughter
Away from the raging desire

I'm going down to the cool, cool water
I'm trying to start anew
I'm not sure what to do
I look to the water, can it inspire?

When it offers a reflection
Does it offer me protection
A cleansing, a connection
To all the places water touches
Each little drop, at least such is
The idea floating in my head
Or rising as steam like words I've said
As the water's met by fire

Where does this river go?
Is there any way to know?
Will I be dragged below
By the undertow?

Let its waters close over me
Although I don't want to drown
But let its cleansing set me free
By losing myself I may be found

Paul Beaulieu
Paul, a McGill alumnus, now studies water at the UQAM swimming pool.

Water and Judaism: Living on a Prayer

There is a deluge of references to water in the Jewish Bible: water purifies; water is punishment; water is salvation; Divine wisdom will cover the earth like water. Total immersion in a properly prepared pool of water, a mikvah, is part of the conversion process. Some Jewish men immerse in a mikvah every day, some women once a month.

Every year on the evening of December 4th (December 5th on the year before a leap year), we Jews start praying for water. The winter of the solar year has begun and rain is needed. Not that Canada has any shortage, but this prayer has a more international aspect. It reminds us of those who need rain to live or who are in danger from too much rain. As we pray on Sukkot (Tabernacles), the festival at the beginning of the rainy season, may the rain be “for life and not for death.” Praying for rain also has a spiritual aspect that I would like to share.

In Deuteronomy 11:10-12, as the Jews prepare to enter the Promised Land, they are told that this land is superior to the land of Egypt, where they had been slaves. In Egypt there is abundant river water at the level of the fields and life is easy. The Promised Land, on the other hand, is praised as a place of hills and streams where one is completely dependent on rain.

At first glance, this seems like a good argument to return to Egypt. There they can farm in the secure knowledge that there will be no drought. In the land of Canaan, they will never be secure. Why would this dependence on rain be presented as an advantage?

The answer is in the continuation, where we see that God constantly scrutinizes the Promised Land. The dependence on rain connects the land to God. More specifically, it connects the people of the land to God. God sends rain dependent on the people’s merits. The sense of dependency on God felt in times of impending drought brings the people to improve themselves morally and seek to reconnect to their Creator.

In Egypt, the feeling of complete security leads the people to forget their Creator who gives them all they have. There is nothing stopping them from descending into immorality. With nothing existential to pray for, the people of the land are unlikely to grow spiritually.

Praying for rain, even though we are in Canada, reminds us that we all depend on God for all we have. It reminds us to seek to grow morally and spiritually. It reminds us that hard times in our lives can be an opportunity to reconnect to our Creator.

Rabbi Sammy Jackman
Rabbi Jackman is a graduate of Math studies at Oxford University, and Talmudic studies at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel. He is currently the Rabbi for Hillel McGill.

Water and Text

Living creatures are nourished by food, and food is nourished by rain; rain itself is the water of life, which comes from selfless worship and service.

_Bhagavad-Gita_

The theme for the next issue of _Radin is_

_Religion and Science and Technology_

Coming to a stand near you in late February!
Interested in the relationship between religion and scientific research or technological progress? Contribute!
Any submissions should be sent to radix@yours.com
no later than February 1.
Mother's Sanctuary

There in some sweet, gentlest intimacy behind the veil did I behold your handmaids: tenderly smiling... un murmuring, patient with timeless ness, knowing no expectancy, no frontier. ---How I entered, Mother, into your compassion's chamber I know not—but there, all suffering left me: some ancient memory unrecollectable called me home. And as love does not allow a past so distantly past to be grasped as past presence, this body of your earth's longings yielded up its heart's hands and breathed release. Mother, there, in your compassion's chamber in your handmaids' care, it knew peace. Whatever hope was in my soul before this time became yours—and it endures in you. Now buoyant upon somehow unknowable, indiscernible seas' visions' forms I float—and neither sleep nor awakening do I know: my Mother's sanctuary is this sweet dream. I feel the lateness, too, of the summer's breath, and 'th' expensiveness of its fecundity. Say among the countless feather seeds that drift only one were to land and grow. . . . Would it be? ---Why, it would be you!---speak your handmaids in their intimacy. Surrendering though... my soul needs a whispering from the Unknown. It will be Me...

Michelle Rebidoux
Michelle is a PhD 3 student and sessional lecturer in Religious Studies. Her focus is phenomenology of religion.

Water and Waste

For a moment, let me take you to a spot in Peru, where the Andes Mountains are home to a group of Indigenous peoples. The Andes are extremely dry lands, where rainfall is unreliable and drought is not uncommon. Now, let's travel 12,000 km away to where the Burunge live, a semi-arid region of central Tanzania. There, rivers dry up between June and October and there is only sporadic rainfall even in the "rainy" season. In both regions, an overwhelming number of people are farmers, whose survival is directly tied to the land. Anthropologists living among both groups have noted that no element is believed more important than water. Thus, rainwater takes on tremendous spiritual significance, imbued with life force and divinity. Among the Burunge, water is likened to saliva, urine, and blood, while the Indigenous of Peru refer to it as mother's milk.

Here in Canada we are truly wealthy with water, in a way unparalleled around the world. According to Environment Canada, we have approximately 2 million lakes, significantly more than any other country. We also have more wetlands than any other country, covering close to 1.5 million km²—25% of all wetlands in the world. Our rivers produce 7% of the world's renewable water, and only Brazil and Russia have more renewable freshwater than we do. Little wonder, then, that water is so cheap. Canadians pay less for water than citizens in nearly any other developed country.

So Canada is wealthy with water, all right—and Canadians know it. On average, each of us uses close to 1500 cubic meters of water per year, second only to our neighbours to the south. Broken down, that's 326 litres per person each day, twice as much as the average European. Few of us ever give much thought to water conservation, and even fewer understand why this is a problem.

Israelis, like Canadians, live in a developed country where they enjoy many of the privileges of a "First World" lifestyle. Water, though, is never taken for granted in a country where over 65% of land is desert. While we Canadians go about our day with little regard to water supply, Israelis cannot afford to be so careless. Go into an Israeli public restroom and you'll see that toilets have two different flush settings—one regular, and one for "lighter loads" that wastes less water. Perhaps Canadians could learn a thing or two from this. According to Environment Canada, a full 30% of our daily water use is literally flushed down the toilet. So when it comes to water, we are both one of the world's greatest producers and greatest abusers. Let's take note of some of the peoples living abroad, in whom we see signs of a deep connection to the land. Thankfully, we Canadians are strangers to desert and drought. But in a time when environmental degradation is rampant, a little connection wouldn't hurt—and water seems a reasonable place to start.

Brent Harris
Brent is a U2 Anthropology/History student. He has been to Israel and experienced their toilets first hand.
Islam attributes great importance to water and, if asked, most Muslims will testify that they consume more water to cleanse and purify themselves than to drink. God created water prior to building the heavens and the earth, and before He had begun the process of creation. He created Adam from a mix of water and earth, and from him, created his wife Eve, and all of mankind. God even describes the abundance of water in Paradise, which will be embedded with infinite rivers, sufficient for all to drink, as a symbol of His mercy. In this way, water is the essence of life, creation, and Paradise.

It was not a mere coincidence that the Holy Qur'an, with its innumerable references to water, descended in the deserted lands of Arabia, where water was highly valued due its scarcity. The desire of the people for Paradise intensified their faith.

Purification of one's body parts through ablution is obligatory upon every Muslim before prayer, and highly recommended prior to touching and reading the Qur'an, in respect for God's words. It is not sufficient to have good intentions; one should purify and alert his body parts prior to communicating with one's Creator through prayer. As well, one has to shower the entire body (Ghusl) to rinse any impurities resulting from intercourse, menstruation, or birth, prior to approaching prayer. As it cleanses one from impurities, water is said to wash away one's sins.

God warns mankind about wrongness of wasting water, distributing it unequally, as we see many politicians do, and about keeping it selfishly to oneself, refusing to share it with those in desperate need of it. He constantly reminds us in the Qur'an, that He pours abundant rain from the skies, giving it quantity and taste. Indeed, the water we drink is sweet, while that of the seas is salty. Rainwater is moderate and soothing, satisfying thirst and resuscitates dead vegetation, while water floods are excessive, destructive, and mercilessly ravaging. Truly, God is perfectly aware of the quantity He pours down and of its qualities. What a genius Creator is He who has created the oceans, which receive the sunlight, reflect it with equal distribution, and embark once again in their infinite cycle of rain and water. Water is free of charge, yet seldom do we remember to be thankful.

Reem Eid
Reem is a student of occupational therapy at McGill and a member of the MSA.

Holy Water

Water is important to humanity, even suspending religious considerations. We live watery lives. Water sustains and nourishes not only us, but all of life. It is the medium through which almost all the chemical transactions of life are carried out. Little wonder, then, that water has acquired so much ceremonial importance in all cultures and societies. In its abundance it is rarely taken for granted. Where it is rare, it is elevated almost to the status of godhood.

An important distinction may be made between living water and “dead” or stagnant water. Living water flows, brings life, and is vibrant, clean, and vital. Hence it is common to use flowing water to wash. It would hardly be appropriate to use stagnant water to cleanse—one must use living water.

In the Catholic Church, a blessing spoken over water by an ordained minister (a priest or a deacon) turns the water (tap water, bottled water, etc.) into holy water. Prior to the Vatican II conference, the holy water used in the Catholic Church was made from a combination of salt and water: a symbol of life and incorruptibility. Salt is a seasoning, but also a preservative. Salt came to be seen as a symbol of permanence and wisdom in Old Testament times. In a biblical story, Elisha casts salt into bad water to make it good. This is suggestive of a reason why salt and water came to be married in the Catholic Church.

The blessings spoken over holy water (and, where it is still used, the salt added to water) are essentially an exorcism against the influence of evil. More importantly, however, the blessing also invokes God’s blessing on whoever uses it—for the right purposes, of course! The uses of holy water in the church are varied, and they include baptism and aspersing of the congregation by the priest. Baptismal water is typically blessed by the priest on Holy Saturday. It should be noted that any type of water is suitable for use in baptism. In the course of the blessing, a reference to the flood as a symbol of cleansing alludes to the cleansing from original sin in baptism. Aspersion, the sprinkling of the congregation with holy water, is also meant to symbolize spiritual cleansing (cf. Psalm 51:7). In the same vein, it is common to find holy water placed at the entrance to most churches for the use of the congregation.

An interesting use of holy water is in exorcism. It makes sense that water and salt, symbols of life, preservation, and incorruptibility, would be used in exorcism. Whereas exorcism does not necessarily involve material objects, the use of holy water is frequently recommended to the budding exorcist in Roman Catholic tradition as an effective adjunct to quenching the flames of hell. St. Theresa of Avila is said to have remarked that there is nothing that puts evil spirits to flight more than the use of holy water.

Robert Munga
Robert is Catholic Christian person from a country that grows great coffee.
Do you think water should be taxed?

Editor’s Note: The following exchange of ideas came out of a lively discussion during a Radix board meeting one Friday afternoon. While we were originally planning to set up a dialogue between two people of differing viewpoints, we discovered that there were so many perspectives on this subject, even among our own editorial team, that a dialogue just wouldn’t do. We also discovered that, for most of us, who we are as religious or spiritual individuals has some bearing on how we look at this issue. So, for what it’s worth, here are some of our thoughts on the taxation of water in Canada.

Sara: Having been raised Protestant, I was instilled with a sense that living a moral life had everything to do with one’s “heart” (to use the lingol. Jesus insisted that motives play a part. This means that my answer to every question is “it depends.” What is the motive behind the tax? Is it simply to fill a fiscal gap in the government’s agenda? Or is it to implement more careful water usage for responsible management of a vital and diminishing resource? I would also have to know the effects of the tax. Would it allow rich people to continue to waste water while prohibiting poor people from affording even their basic bathing and drinking needs? Or would some measure (such as a minimum free amount of water for everyone) be put in place to “punish” only those whose water use is outrageous? As a Christian, my answer to “to tax or not to tax”—or any other moral question—has to start with these questions, and end with “it depends.”

Laura: Sara, you so totally stole my answer. I’m the agnostic here, people! I’m the “well, it depends” person! I don’t make decisions! The rest of you better take a firm, rigid stance on this issue so my confusion can fully penetrate the discussion.

Natalya: Coming from a “born Jewish, but don’t affiliate myself with any religion” perspective, I’m prepared to take a rather materialistic view at the issue of taxing water. We are talking about Canada, where water is abundant. If you’re not paying for your water it doesn’t mean it’s free. Somebody has to pay. Whether you’re paying for water directly (water tax) or indirectly (income taxes, municipal taxes), you’re still paying for it. I think we should be aware of this. This will avoid useless consumption, and we might be able to supply other nations that really need it with water. Another issue is the fact that most water wastage is done not by individuals, but by corporations. Making businesses pay for their water consumption will not only make them more efficient in their production, but will also save our valuable resource. So my position is: impose the water tax! We need to be aware that water is not free and that we should not waste it.

Dany: As Canadians we are already more heavily taxed than any other first world country I can think of—In return, we are guaranteed certain social programs and essential services, the most important three of which are access to education, health care, and clean water. We don’t need to be taxed on water usage because we are already paying for the right to have water. Imagine a family that can barely survive as it is, when this new tax is introduced it becomes the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Meanwhile the rich who use water for swimming pools will be able to afford the tax, and most likely not conserve water at all. Encouraging people to conserve water through a tax incentive program, where households can receive compensation for limiting their water intake, would be more effective. At the very least, it will be more effective than a tax—positive re-enforcement is always more effective than its negative counter-part.

Shahana: I have been thinking about whether or not I should give my opinion on this issue, because I am not a Canadian citizen; so these are my observations as an outsider. It’s been mentioned that Canadians are already being taxed for water, and that the government needs money to ensure the proper treatment of water. I think that this tax should be made a more specific tax. This will remind people that water needs to be conserved. I lived my whole life in Pakistan, and one of the first things I noticed was that here people have their lights switched on all the time. In Pakistan, because electricity is so expensive, every time we leave the room we switch off the lights, that is our reminder that we should save electricity. I definitely think being aware that Canadians are actually paying for their water will make people think twice before they waste water.

Ros: From a pagan perspective, I’m against the idea of ownership of water. I believe that water is one of the prime elements of life, and, as such, should not be bought or sold. Furthermore, I see water as something that is sacred for its own sake. I can’t see a specific value being placed on it. Waste water is an issue to be resolved by a community, and leaving it to government or corporate entities is irresponsible and risky. The only instance in which I could countenance the taxation of water would be for use in corporate activities. Water is a resource of the people, of those who live on the land. It is meant to support life, and should be valued as such. Corporate activities don’t fall under either heading, and water sources should be protected from such abuse. I’m not sure if taxation is the way to do this, but it is one possibility, among many, that should be considered.

Laura: As a devout agnostic, I think the question we need to be asking here is, quite simply, why? One side of the argument claims that water is a free, natural resource. But the other side says water’s free and natural state is being abused. Instead of choosing a side, I think we need to look at the issue as a whole. What are we doing “wrong” as a society, that we need to debate the potential scarcity of one of our nation’s most abundant resources? At what point does a free and natural resource become a powerful economic tool? Let’s face it: water is already a business. We need to understand how and why water got this way before we can make any fruitful decisions on the matter.

Bob: Imagine this: life without water. BLAFF!!! Your ego is annihilated. Nirvana! Eureka! Rapture! There is no life without water! There is something super special about those two hydrogen and one oxygen molecules when they get stuck together. G-d’s spirit moved over the face of the deep (i.e. waters). G-d split the Sea of Reeds (water) for the Israelites to walk through. Jesus walked on water. I’m all with the Pagan and Agnostic voices on this one. We need to take a serious look at how a nation veritably inundated with both fresh water and budget surpluses can be in a situation of taxing, privatizing, and commercializing water. The idea of taxing corporations for their extraordinary water use may be a good idea. On the other hand, it may be futile, those users are rarely deterred by monetary incentives. Taxing the individual seems to me one more usurpation of the right to live simply and simply live without undue interference from governments. Finally, we’ve got to clean that stuff up. We have poisoned the source of life itself.
Religion and Culture

Faith or Nationalism: A Review of Feuchtwanger’s Josephus

Josephus is the first book of Feuchtwanger’s trilogy about the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus Flavius in the first century CE. The book was published in Germany in 1932 under the name The Judaic War. A year later it was published under the name Josephus in the United States. Unfortunately, all copies available in English are from that period, for the trilogy was never republished in North America.

Although based around historical facts, the novel isn’t the best source for accurate historical research either on Josephus or the Roman Empire at the time. Feuchtwanger was a Jew living in Germany in the 1930s, and his characters, both the Romans and the Jews, speak and feel of the author’s own times. The second book of the trilogy goes on to feature another Roman Emperor, Domitian, whose harsh tyranny reminds one of Hitler. But the novel makes for an interesting read.

The novel features Josephus as the main character. He is portrayed as a hero torn between his religious beliefs and his desire to be Roman, which at that time meant “Citizen of the World.” Josephus starts as a hero fighting for his people. He joins, and ends up commanding, a separatist group that wants Judea freed from the Roman Empire. However, when defeated by the Romans, his perseverance and desire for power win him the favor of the Emperor, Vespasian. Josephus becomes a rightful Roman citizen, hated both by his people and Romans alike. For Josephus, Rome is Great. Rome gives him the power he desires. After the revolt in Judea is crushed, Josephus moves to Alexandria. Rejected by the powerful Jewish community as a traitor, he does everything in his power to be accepted by his people. However, passion wins once again. Josephus marries an Egyptian and agrees to participate in the final military campaign to Judea, recording historical events as they happen.

The last part of the novel describes the siege of Jerusalem. Once again, Josephus struggles to be in the enemy’s camp. He sees his people suffer and, although they want his death, he wants to be with them. But he stays with the Romans. He watches as Jerusalem falls and the Temple is destroyed for the second time. He then returns to Rome and is forced to participate in the celebration of the fall of his people. Banned from the Roman synagogue, he secludes himself and starts writing the promised history of the fall of the second Temple. This is the end of the first book of Feuchtwanger’s trilogy.

I think that the novel raises an important point, relevant to our society today, about the conflict between nationalism and religion. In some countries more than others, nationalism is popularized almost as a religious cult. People have believed in the power of the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, and, more recently, the United Stated of America. Whether the regime is good or bad, the average citizen wants to be proud of his or her country. With the current concept of globalization, we are taught to think of ourselves as citizens of the world. But what if your religious belief or your religious institution want to make a clear distinction between the two? Stands for different values? What if you morally have to choose? Do you then become a traitor against your country or your faith? Josephus ended up being considered a traitor by the Jews and an outsider by the Romans. But he was compelled to try to combine his desire to be a Roman with his desire to remain a Jew. We are all faced with the same choice. We want to be firm with our values and our beliefs. But although we all like absolutes, they are highly unachievable. At one point, we will either have to choose or give up on choosing.

Water and Text

(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits; and Grace from their Lord.

Qur’an 47:15

“Nationalism is power hunger tempered by self-deception.” George Orwell

Photo courtesy Sarvodaya

Natalya Demberg
Natalya is our Religion and Culture columnist.

Feuchtwanger’s Josephus is available in the McLennan Library.
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