

## Encyclopedia resources

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**Encyclopedia entry for:**

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**Hydrolatry**

*Hydrolatry* has been referred to as a 'single religious motif spanning the whole Eurasian continent and beyond' (Rattue, 1995: 10). As a concept, hydrolatry reflects a renaissance in ideas relating to the water-veneration practices of nature-orientated religions with *religion* being defined as:

'...that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms, which are related to transformative forces and powers and which people consider to be dangerous and / or beneficent and / or meaningful in some ultimate way' (Taylor, 2005: x).

*Nature*, as understood by contributors to this publication, is 'that world which includes - but at the same time is perceived to be largely beyond - our human bodies, and which confronts us daily with its apparent otherness' (*ibid*). As a term of reference, hydrolatry has been associated with socio-political values that denounced the nature-worship of non-Christian practices as well as the papist beliefs of baptismal rituals (see also: BRITAIN 400-1100). However, the term re-emerged in late 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship as a means of examining the religio-cultural associations of *water cult* practices and beliefs from a variety of perspective. James Rattue's seminal work, *The Living Stream* (1995), discussed the sacralisation of wells and springs from an historical perspective. He introduced the notion of an 'hydrolatrous instinct' in relation to a universal 'well-cult' motif whilst, simultaneously, attempting to de-bunk mystical Celto-centric theories that had dominated since the mid-19<sup>th</sup>.century (*ibid*: 21-23). Rattue's pragmatism nevertheless valorised the term hydrolatry as a means of identifying and discussing ritualised water-related activities such as bathing, prayer, votive offerings, pilgrimage and well-dressing.

From an etymological perspective, the term *hydrolatry* stems from the Greek words

*hydro* and *latreia*, that is, *water* and *worship of* (Onions, 1966). A literal translation of the term is therefore water-veneration, or, water-worship. Water's multivalent qualities, prolific metaphor-making capacity, and essentiality to all forms of life lend it to matters numinous and transcendent as discussed by historian-philosopher Mircea Eliade (1958). From comparative studies of religion, Eliade concluded that 'water symbolises the whole of potentiality; it is '*fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence', that is, 'the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return' (*ibid*: 188). Studies investigating the role of water in religion affirm Eliade's hypothesis in terms of water's unique qualities to engender existential meaning as well as imagine cosmological schema (see *also*: WATER IN ZOROASTRIANISM). Terje Oestigaard has observed that water 'is omnipresent, omnipotent, generative and life-giving' and, of particular significance, that 'these powers come from water itself' (2017: 11). Thus, water has been discussed from a variety of perspectives as an element that has long been deified, venerated and propitiated for its healing, purifying, and generative properties. With increasing recognition of the inter-connected, inter-dependent, nature of finely-balanced ecosystems, water-veneration may have reached its zenith with the emergence of a 'deep blue' religion within the field of nature-based spiritual practices (Shaw & Francis, 2014).

With reference to previous notions of a *water cult*, the term hydrolatry has been appropriated by scholars of religion, philosophy, cultural studies and social anthropology to examine and discuss beliefs and practices relating to acts of veneration largely associated with natural water sources in the landscape such as springs, wells, rivers and lakes (see *also*: NATURE RELIGION and CELTIC SPIRITUALITY). The idea of *living* water, that is, waters that emerge from the depths of the earth or traverse the landscape, appears intrinsic to practices of water-veneration as expressed through ritualised activities that include the adornment of springs, wells and fountains. Such practices have been ascribed by Eliade to 'the manifestation of a sacred presence' at particular sources of water (1958: 199). Historians of religion (Bord & Bord, 1986; Rattue, 1995; Linton, 2010, Bradley, 2012) have noted that ocean waters are generally believed to be the domain of male deities, whilst other types of water are mostly viewed as the habitation, or manifestation, of female

deities. The deification of rivers such as the Danube and Seine, named for the goddesses Danu and Sequana in pre-Christian Europe, and the dedication of springs and wells to pre- and post-Christian saints such as Brigid and Mary (see *also*: BRIGIT), are testimony to ideas of sacred presence. Such ideas appear pan-universal with, for instance, the River Ganges in India being venerated as the embodiment of Ganga, the great Mother Goddess in the Hindu pantheon; and, Oguta Lake in Nigeria being the domain of Ogbuide, one of the many matriarchal water deities known as Mama Wati venerated, and feared (see *also*: MAMMY WATER), throughout the African continent (Okwuosa *et al*, 2017).

The work of cultural anthropologist Veronica Strang (2004; 2015) has furthered understandings of water's capacity to invoke a sense of the sacred. In *The Meaning of Water* (2004: 85), Strang postulated that 'the concept of water as a sacred substance is ubiquitous in religious history.' Her ethnographic study on human-water relationships in the Stour Valley, Dorset, revealed strong archaeological evidence for water-veneration practices in this rural, middle-class, corner of the British Isles. Her study also revealed that 'hydrolatry is alive and well in the English cultural landscape of the twenty-first century' (*ibid*: 102). Strang's examination of water's aesthetic qualities in tandem with its capacity to symbolise the cycles of life, death and regeneration also led her to pronounce that water bridges the sacred-secular divide. Examining the hydrolatrous ways of Stour Valley communities, Strang conjoined symbiotic pagan-Christian baptisms, water-blessing ceremonies and well-dressing practices with the ritual aspects of river walking, fishing and sailing. Applying the term *secular hydrolatry* to the latter activities, Strang described this idea as 'the sanctification of water without the burden of religious dogma' (*ibid*: 111). Strang's ethnographic work suggests a fluidity of ideas between traditional church-going communities and nature-revivalist groups in terms of their approach to water-veneration practices that, in turn, epitomise the renaissance in modern-day hydrolatry. Her fieldwork revealed a move across the religious-secular divide towards practices that 'seek greater harmony and reconciliation with nature' (*ibid*: 94-95).

Ritual well-dressing practices, within the English cultural landscape that Strang

alluded to, capture the essence of syncretic hydrolatrous beliefs. As discussed by aforementioned historians of religions, the adornment of springs, wells and fountains pre-dates ancient Greco-Romano societies but, in terms of documented evidence, the Roman festival of Fontanalia is likely to be the forerunner of modern water-veneration practices that honour dedicated saints, celebrate seasonal markers such as the fertility festival of Beltane / May Day and, above all, give thanks to water for its healing and life-giving properties (see *also*: ROMAN NATURAL RELIGION). Accompanying performances may include the placement of small objects into the waters, a clockwise circumnavigation of the waters and hanging strips of rag on nearby trees or bushes. Despite an admission that such practices were the result of 'romanticised assumptions about the past', Dieter Gerten (2014: 34) argues that they nevertheless 'represent a modern spirituality that is not in need of historic rationalisation' suggesting, instead, that such sensibilities for water may serve to address urgent water-related environmental issues. In their introduction to *Deep Blue* (2014), Silvie Shaw and Andrew Francis' definition of this nature-based religious movement resonates with Rattue's idea of an hydrolatrous instinct. They explain how 'a deep reverence for water' is embedded within the movement and, like other forms of nature religion, 'the deep blue venerates the ecological processes on which life depends' (*ibid*: 1). Such an explanation exemplifies the notion of hydrolatry, as well as captures the focus of enquiry within this encyclopedic publication, that is, the relationships between human beings, religious practice and the natural world.

**1249 words**

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### Further Reading

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