Water in Culture and Religion

C E 397 – Transboundary Water Resources

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Intro:

The entire world seems to recognize the importance of water and its necessity for life. However, water is also respected for many additional reasons in different cultures and religions. All views on water are related to its basic functions and significance to life.

Water in Culture:

The fact that water is necessary for survival makes it a key part of culture. All major civilizations developed around a large source of water—and most often a source of freshwater. This allows for agriculture, trade, transport and defense. The benefits are numerous and as a result allow for population and economic growth.

Culture and religion are often associated, and as a result cultural views on water are generally based on the predominant religious views of the area. Consequently a discussion of water in Religion is pertinent to the discussion of water in culture.

Water in Religion:

Water plays a significant role not only in the five major religions, but also in nearly every recognized religion in history. While each religion may differ in rituals and beliefs, there are some consistent views on water related to the foundation of most religions and the natural significance of water. It is not difficult to understand the meaning in, and reasoning for each religion’s water rituals and beliefs. We will briefly discuss some of the symbolism of water that is consistent between any the following religions: Bahá’í, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shinto and Zoroastrianism.

Most religions are based on a set of morals, what is right and wrong, and most view doing the wrong thing as being “impure”. Since water cleans and purifies, many
religions have beliefs or rituals that associate water with the power to clean us of our moral impurities.

Water plays a strong role in both life and death for everyone. Many religions recognize this significance and associate it with their own concepts of life and death. For example, many views on creation involve water, and most of those speak of water as the very source of the first existence. Also, water is often the main component of birth rituals and death rituals.

**Conclusion:**

The qualities of water and its necessity to life result in it being a significant part of religion and culture. Given the nature of morals, it is not surprising that cleaning and purifying are the most common functions of water in religion. As a result, water is viewed as important and “special” in nearly every region of the world.

**Recommended Reading:**

My presentation is very broad, and as a result I am not giving any “required reading” since it is not necessary to have any prior knowledge on the subject. This is an article from World Water Day 2006 that sums up world views on water: