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BOOK REVIEW

Oestigaard, T. 2013. *Water, Christianity and the rise of capitalism*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris. ISBN 978-1-78076-066 7, 209 pages, US\$85.

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The author of *Water, Christianity and the Rise of Capitalism* is Dr. Terje Oestigaard, a Research Fellow at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden previously stationed in Bergen and Oslo, Norway. He is an archaeologist who has been engaged in water history research. He is also a co-editor of three volumes of *A History of Water, Series I* by the same publisher.

As the title implies, the book describes in a very interesting way the quite dramatic changes in the perceptions of water as a result of the Christian Reformation in the 1600s. Earlier, Christendom believed that misfortune and catastrophe were caused by the Devil which is why it sought protection from holy water blessed by priests. The Protestant Reformation abandoned the concept of holy water which became one of the main subjects of contention between Protestants and Catholics.

The major argument of the book is that Protestantism did not change the actual beliefs of the common people about the efficacy of holy water although the subject was debated heatedly by theologians. Although the Protestant Church opposed the former pagan water cults and practices, its members continued to believe in holy water even after the Reformation. The author challenges the obviously too straightforward claim by Weber that the Protestant work ethic came about as a result of the elimination of magic and superstition by the Reformation.

The book consists of six chapters: Introduction, Water and Christianity; Holy Water and Baptism; Mortification, Cleanliness, and Godliness; Holy Wells, God's Penalty and the Devil's Water; Magic, Science and Religion. They are briefly illustrated below on the basis of some selected interesting – yet subjective – points.

As the author notes water is at the same time part of nature, culture and religion which makes it unique. According to Auguste Comte, there are three 'ages of mankind': the cosmological age, the religious age and the scientific age, which are also parallel perceptions according to Goubert. In any case, the 16th and 17th centuries were seen as the 'Golden Age of Faith' in Europe.

The Hebrew Bible has 580 direct references to water and many others to rivers, wells, rain, etc. While the world it describes existed in a desert environment, England and Northern Europe had enough water the year round. In history, water has been both holy and unholy. Although 'Holy Water' is a well-known Catholic concept, the Bible mentions 'Holy Water' only once. In any case, water as such plays an important role in Christianity in baptism and ritual washing.

Water that has once been holy may have later become evil taking on unpleasant qualities. According to Trevor-Roper the revival of the witch craze in the 1560s was the product of the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. Historical records tell us that about 90,000 persons were put on trial

and as many as 45,000 were executed for witchcraft in Europe. England condemned the last person to death for witchcraft in 1712.

The history of purity has also undergone interesting changes over time. For instance, during the 4th and 5th centuries being unwashed and dirty became a sign of holiness. During the Middle Ages public baths were often considered nests of vice, and the Church naturally opposed them. Yet, it was not the Church's influence that ended the sinful bathing culture but disease and pandemics: the Black Death in 1347-50, syphilis at the end of the 15th century and the Great Plague of 1665-66.

In this context the reviewer must note that at least in his home country bathing and, particularly the sauna culture, are still associated with cleanliness, and people still regard the sauna as a 'holy place' and a fundamental part of their culture.

The number of holy wells in Great Britain and Ireland is about 8000. The water of different wells was believed to heal different diseases. No matter what the Church taught, people continued to believe in the curative and protective properties of holy water. Indeed, beliefs in holy water and in the magical powers of wells in England have lasted to date.

It is also mentioned that Pierre Perrault's *Treatise on the Origin of Springs* from 1674 was a hallmark of the science of the hydrological cycle. Its acceptance as such probably took a long time as was the case with miasma – the idea that diseases are caused by polluted air. In spite of bacteriological findings, these theories were believed by many for quite a long time.

The study focuses on analysing what humans do and why they do it, if they have religious convictions, but are not, as the author clarifies, primarily concerned with theological exegesis. Yet, it appears in general that scientists are increasingly finding that the answers science provides us today are not necessarily in contradiction with faith.

On the whole, the text reads fluently. The book has 34 illustrations, a glossary of key terms, as many as 275 literary sources as well as an index covering names, places and concepts. It is a valuable addition to sector literature and can be warmly recommended to anybody interested in the various roles and meanings of water in society, particularly from the perspectives of religion and sociology. It is also an interesting book for those who have not approached water from these perspectives. In fact, the book is so challenging that I feel the need to read it at least once more.

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