

WATER, CHRISTIANITY AND THE RISE OF CAPITALISM

BOOK WRITTEN BY Mr. Terje Oestigaard

REVIEWED BY Mr. Len Abrams, SIWI Associate

This is not a book for the faint hearted. The popular wisdom of avoiding the topics of religion and politics in polite conversation is not without good reason! Water has always been an integral part of human experience – both as blessing and as curse. It is not surprising therefore that it is deeply embedded in the holy writings and faith traditions of the world's religions.

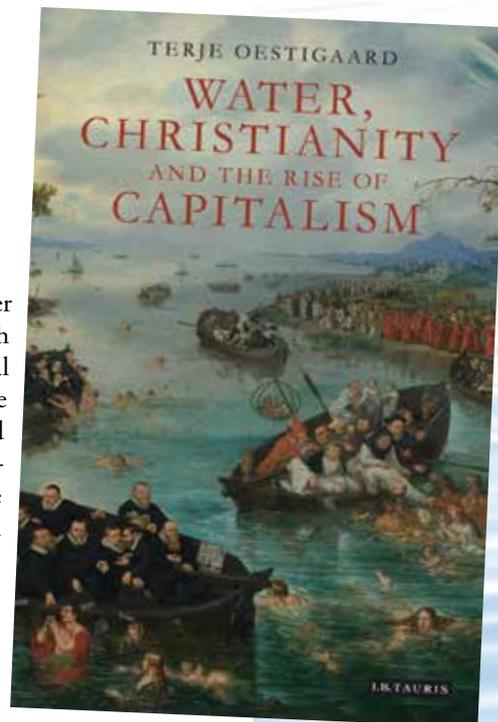
Oestigaard undertakes a brave and fascinating venture in tracing the role of water in the Hebrew scriptures of the 'Old Testament', in the Christian scriptures and through two thousand years of ecclesiastical history and tradition. The work provides a thorough analysis of the role of water in scripture both as an instrument of judgement and of blessing. Water (or the lack of it) plays a key role throughout the history of Israel against a backdrop of the climatic conditions of the Ancient Near East. In particular the rite of baptism and the nature of the waters of baptism is discussed, ranging from the baptism of Jesus to the changing characteristics of the sacrament of baptism in the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Different perspectives on water, whether it is believed to inherently possess spiritual qualities (for good or evil), or only reflect such qualities symbolically, are indicative of the primary fault lines between the Catholic and Reformed traditions. This is illustrated with specific reference to beliefs surrounding holy water and holy wells in England. For the ordinary lay person water was regarded as a defence against evil and a means to induce blessing, fertility and protection. As the Enlightenment brought greater understanding of the natural universe, including the physical

properties of water and phenomena such as the Hydrological Cycle, water became 'de-mystified' and regarded as an amazing part of divine creation, rather than as a substance with intrinsic magic or spiritual abilities.

Oestigaard traces the movement from superstition to rationalism through the reformation, emphasising that this was both a political and religious process. Whether or not changing beliefs and the elimination of magic and superstition as reflected in the changing views on the nature of water were a cause of the rise of the protestant work ethic, is moot. That the Reformation resulted in an ethic which regarded economic success as religious merit, leading to the Industrial Revolution and capitalism is clear.

No doubt not everyone will agree with what the author regards as Christian doctrine and beliefs in relation to water and other matters, but all serious readers will be impressed by the thorough treatment of the topic. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terje Oestigaard is a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden. Apart from Scandinavia, he has conducted fieldworks in Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Jordan, India, Nepal, Palestine and Tanzania. Oestigaard's main research interests are death rituals and cremations, water and religion, and political archaeology.

His current project is "Rainmaking and Climate Change in Tanzania: Traditions, Rituals and Globalisation".

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