



EDITIONS  
AGORA 

# THE SPIRIT OF THE RIVERS

CALENDAR OF RELIGIONS  
SEPTEMBER 2020 – DECEMBER 2021



## THE SPIRIT OF THE RIVERS

Rivers never run alone. Every river has a watershed where it supports human life and interacts with the totality of living things. Every river is a kingdom. Rivers are where legends, religions and civilizations are conceived and flourish. They tell a story. The Ganges narrates India, the Nile chronicles Egypt, the Mississippi unfolds the southern United States. Rivers have seen the emergence of some of the oldest civilizations along their banks, and many are sacred to human religious cultures. For the pharaonic Egyptians, the Nile was a god to be worshiped for the great abundance it bestowed. For the Hindus, the Ganges is a goddess who

washes away all sin. For the Maori, the Whanganui is the great ancestral spirit. For the Baha'is, rivers embody the Creator and all organic life on earth. But the relationship between humankind and rivers can be memorial as well as spiritual: it can be expressed in rituals, such as the practice of baptism by some Christian traditions in the Mississippi delta.

The relationship between religions and rivers is diverse yet testifies to a universal and vital bond that underpins all life. Thus most rivers are steeped in human history and spirituality.



1 CALENDAR  
16 TRADITIONS  
AND RITUALS  
16 RIVERS

This 2020-2021 edition contains:

- ▶ splendid photographs that testify to the relationship between religions and rivers;
- ▶ an introduction and informative articles written by eminent specialists;
- ▶ nearly 150 festivals clearly explained (meaning, origins, rites...).

The calendar covers a period of 16 months (September 2020 to December 2021) to meet the needs of schools (academic year) and the public (calendar year).

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The Temple of Dawn in Bangkok, on the right bank of the Chao Phraya River (Thailand).



The bend of the Yangtze at Shigu in Yunnan Province (China).



A traditional fishing boat on the Senegal River, not far from Saint-Louis (Senegal).

# THE CALENDAR OF RELIGIONS

- A tool for raising awareness of religious pluralism and cultural diversity
- An invitation to dialogue in mutual respect

Each month is articulated on a double-page spread that includes a large, beautiful photograph and details of the main festivals of the different religious traditions: Christianity † (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant), Judaism 🕍, Islam 🕌, Hinduism 🌀, Buddhism 🌀, Sikhism 🌀, Taoism 🌀, Shinto 🌀, Jainism 🌀, Baha'i 🌀 and Zoroastrianism 🌀; as well as ancient religions 🌀, ethnic traditions 🌀 and civil society 🌀.



YANALARTI – Curlew ritual fishing in the dry season, in the region of Upper Xingu, in the Amazon watershed, in Mato Grosso, Brazil.

## OCTOBER 2020

Monday	28	5	12	19	26
			☾ Thanksgiving (US)	☾ Birth of Bahá'í	
Tuesday	29	6	13	20	27
			☾ Birth of Confucius	☾ Feast of the Holy Book of Sikhs	
Wednesday	30	7	14	21	28
Thursday	1	8	15	22	29
	☾ Zhongqiu Festival				☾ Yom Kippur / Mikot
Friday	2	9	16	23	30
		☾ Pongal / Pongal			
Saturday	3	10	17	24	31
	☾ Sukkot (2nd day)	☾ Shmini Atzeret	☾ Navratri		☾ Halloween
Sunday	4	11	18	25	1
	☾ Rosh Hashanah	☾ Sukkot (1st day)	☾ Birth of the Bab	☾ Reformation (FR, DE, UK, etc.)	

### CHINESE FESTIVALS

- 1 Zhongqiu Festival (Mid-autumn festival in honor of the Moon, Moon cakes [mandarins] are eaten)
- 13 Birth of Confucius (551-479 BCE)
- 20 Reformed under the name of Master Kong, his teachings gave birth to the Confucian tradition in China

### SHINTO FESTIVAL

- 71 Kaniyazaki (Month with Gods, 2nd of October) The 8 million people of Japan meet at the Kaniyazaki Shrine in Shimane Prefecture.

### JEWISH FESTIVALS

- 3 Sukkot (3-4, until October 10) Festival of Tabernacles or Sukkot, in memory of the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert during the Exodus. It includes a procession on Hoshana Rabba (7th day) and a closing festival of Shmini Atzeret (8th day)
- 11 Simchat Torah (rejoicing of the Torah) joyful procession carrying the Torah scrolls on the last day of Sukkot

### BUDDHIST FESTIVAL

- 4 Kathina – Theravada celebration marking the end of the monastic retreat in which followers gift the monks the so-called Kathina cloth.

### SECULAR FESTIVALS

- 12 Thanksgiving (Canada, October 12; US, November 28) Thanksgiving Day originally celebrated agricultural harvests. This celebration is an opportunity to gather as a family and enjoy a hearty meal of turkey, potatoes, stuffing and various pies.
- 31 Halloween: Pagan celebration which takes place on the eve of All Saints Day featuring masquerades and the association of spirits.

### HINDU FESTIVALS

- 17 Navratri/Durga Puja (October 17-24) Celebration of the goddess in her various manifestations: Durga, Kali, Uma, Saraswati ...
- 25 Dussehra: Celebration of Rama's victory over the demon Ravana.

### SIKH FESTIVAL

- 29 Feast of the Holy Book of Sikhs: Rise to the status of guru (legend of Guru Gurmukh Sahib, the sacred book of the Sikhs).

### MUSLIM FESTIVAL

- 29 Mawlid al-Nabi / Mawlid – Popular celebration of the birth of the prophet Muhammad in 570 CE.

- Subject to official confirmation
- Jewish festivals always begin the day before at nightfall.
- Dates may vary depending on the country (according to the start of the Islamic year).
- Variable date (1-2 days) depending on the observation of the moon.

## RIVERS AND THE SACRED

The Spirit of the Rivers opens with an accessible three-page introduction presenting its main theme: the relationship between rivers and religious traditions in rituals and practices.

This year the preface is written by Erik Orsenna, author and president of Initiatives for the Future of Great Rivers (IGRF).

Next comes the calendar itself, spanning 16 months from September 2020 to December 2021.

This is followed by 16 pages dedicated to the rivers and traditions that punctuate the calendar. The articles and accompanying maps and photos offer an illustrated history of the lives of these rivers and their relationships with religious traditions.

You will thus discover the diversity of rites and symbols through which the rivers connect the faithful with the divine or the absolute they believe in. Each religion has its own symbolic and ritual relationship with the rivers, but there are several common features: a shared history; the symbolism of the source of life and the mercy of the divine; and rituals of sacrificial offering and purification.



Scene from the Ngondo Festival on the Wouri River, in Douala, Cameroon. This week of festivities takes place each year at the beginning of December. Led by initiates, the ritual ceremonies allow the Sawa people of the Cameroonian coast, to reconnect with Jongo, the "Mother of Waters."

Humanity has maintained a close and deep connection with rivers since time immemorial. The water and fertile silt they drain, sometimes over thousands of kilometers, represent an essential resource for life. Many of the great rivers have seen along their banks the emergence of some of the world's oldest civilizations, such as the Mesopotamians, who lived around 3000 BCE between the Tigris and Euphrates. The same applies to ancient Egypt, "the gift of the Nile" according to the Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BCE). The Egyptians of the pharaonic period worshipped the Nile as a god which bestowed great abundance from its floods.

Several other rivers are sacred to various cultures. For example, Hindus go to the Ganges to purify themselves in the holy waters, and during the *Chhath Pujan* festival they honor the sun god Surya along its banks. In some traditions, rivers harbor spirits that embody the fundamental forces of nature. For the Maori of New Zealand, the Whanganui is the great ancestral spirit. In the Amazon, among the Yawalapitís of Brazil, no fishing begins without the invocation of Warhi, the master of the fish.

Often, especially in Asia, rivers are the preferred sites of rituals dedicated to protective deities. Every year in China, during the Taoist festival of *Duanwu*, dragon boat races are held to celebrate the gods who tame rivers, seas and oceans and protect humanity from their currents. In Thailand, it is to Phra Mae Khongkha, goddess of the waters, that Buddhists confess their breaches of the precepts by releasing small skiffs downstream carrying offerings.

In many traditions, the relationship between man and river is both spiritual and memorial. In the Indian Punjab on the banks of the Kali Bein, a sub-tributary of the Indus, the Sikhs come to honor Guru Nanak, the founder of their religion. For Christians, this relationship is also attached to a fundamental symbol, baptismal water, especially for those who, like the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, practice this rite in a lake or a river, as some Baptist churches do in the Mississippi.

Sources of life, rivers are also fascinating for their sustainability, on a human scale, and their resilience, because they are always reborn, even after the worst drought. Thus in certain traditions they irrigate essential representations of the faith, for example in the image of the vital flow of divine grace for the Bahá'ís and Christians. Likewise, they are also one of the symbols of the abundance of paradise and eternal life, especially for Muslims.

The relationship between religions and rivers is diverse yet testifies to a universal and vital bond that underpins all life. Thus most rivers are steeped in human history and spirituality.



Lantern ceremony along the Miyocasu River, a tributary of the Ota River, Japan, to console the victims of the atomic bombs and to pray for lasting peace. "A-Bomb Day" is held every August 6 in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. The paper lanterns are a tribute to the victims.



A Muslim believer performs the ritual ablutions before prayer in Kabul River, a tributary of the Indus, near the city of Jalalabad, Afghanistan. The paradise that the Quran promises to believers is a lush garden of "rivers of unalterable water."



Believers by the Hudson River in Manhattan during the feast of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), New York, United States. In the traditional ritual the penitent prays and throws pieces of bread (representing their sins) into the water.

more: [Rosh Hashanah](#) / [Cordis](#) via Getty Images



A baptism of Protestant faithful in the Jordan River at Yardenit, close to Lake Tiberias, Israel. The site is a high place of pilgrimage for Christians of all denominations, who come there to meditate and, for some, to be baptized in the memory of the baptism of Jesus.



Major Sumner during a ritual at the confluence of the Darling and Murray rivers in Australia. Major Sumner initiated a ceremony based on traditional dances. Addressing the spirit of the river, it invites, beyond the Aborigines alone, all river folk to green the Murray, which suffers periods of drought aggravated by agriculture and livestock.

- a synthetic and accessible introduction

## THE SACRED AND MEMORIAL NATURE OF RIVERS

- photos testifying to the diversity of practices all around the world



# RIVER RITUALS AROUND THE WORLD



The Rosh Hashanah kibbutz  
Jews praying near the city  
of Uman, in the **Southern Bug**  
watershed (Ukraine)



In agreement with the master  
of fish — Ritual fishing of the  
Yawalapiti in a tributary of the  
**Amazon** (Mato Grosso, Brazil)



The Festival of the Sun  
Hindu offering ritual in the waters  
of the Yamuna, a tributary  
of the **Ganges** (India)



Welcome to the Ancestor River  
Maori welcoming ceremony  
on **Whanganui** (New Zealand,  
North Island)



Orthodox baptism festival at Lake  
**Tana** — Source of the **Blue Nile**,  
Mouth of the **Rhine**,  
on the high plateau of Gojjam  
(Ethiopia)



Stone Ancestors  
Anthropomorphic Inuit cairn at  
the mouth of the **Churchill** River  
(Hudson Bay, Canada)



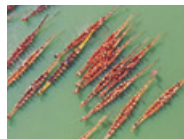
Souls carried away by the waves  
Shinto ritual of floating dolls  
near the mouth of the **Kinokawa**  
(Japan)



The flow of divine grace  
To the sources of the Baha'i  
faith on the banks of the **Tigris**  
(River loop in Turkey)



Catholic pilgrimage  
to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer  
Mouth of the **Rhône**,  
in the Camargue (France)



The Dragon Boat Festival of  
the Taoists — Fluvial race on the  
Xiao, a tributary of the Xiang in  
the **Yangtze** watershed (China)



Tabaski, the Muslim Festival  
of Sacrifice — At the mouth  
of the **Senegal** River (Saint-Louis,  
Senegal)



The Ivan Kupala summer festival  
Slavic ritual in the Omsk region,  
in the **Ob** and **Irtys** watershed  
(Russia)



When the gods sailed on the river  
Procession of the goddess Anuket  
in a boat on the **Nile** (ancient  
Egypt)



The rebirth of a sacred river  
Sikh faithful cleaning the Kali  
Bein, a sub-tributary of the **Indus**  
(Punjab State, India)



Feast of the goddess of the waters  
Buddhist monks carrying candles  
on the Ping, a tributary of  
the **Chao Phraya** River (Thailand)



Christian baptism in deep water  
Lake Providence, **Mississippi** delta  
(Louisiana State, United States  
of America)

geohistorical  
articles on rivers

## MISSISSIPPI THE SOURCE OF GOSPEL

The small **Lake Itasca** is the only one, among thousands composing Minnesota's boreal forest, to be considered a true source of the Mississippi. Before the arrival of Europeans, this region was the territory of the Ojibwas, a North American peoples to whom the river owes its name, *mississibi* meaning "great river" in the Ojibwa language.

It is not the longest river in the US but it has the biggest watershed, third-largest in the world after the Amazon and the Congo. The width of the Mississippi is due to its major tributaries: the Missouri, from the Rocky Mountains in the west, and the Ohio, whose mingled waters come from the Appalachians in the east. The Missouri drains the large cereal plains, and the Ohio, the industrial regions. Flowing south, the Mississippi runs through different latitudes. From its confluence with the Ohio, it enters the sub-tropical moist zone; the first part of its lower section drains cotton and sugar cane production land.

In the 19th century, runaway slaves would move back upriver to join the abolitionist states. At the beginning of the 20th century, numerous others took the same road, hoping to earn their living in the northern metropolises. Among them was Mahalia Jackson (1911–1972), who would become famous in



Nicknamed the "Queen of Gospel," Mahalia Jackson was a native of the Mississippi delta. As a youngster, she would perform in the choir of the Baptist church where her father preached.

Chicago for giving her golden voice to gospel music and the negro spiritual. Born in the delta, in New Orleans, Mahalia was baptized in the Mississippi's waters when she was 12 years old. **Pierre Rouyer**



Source: Lake Itasca (450 m), Minnesota State, US  
Mouth: Gulf of Mexico, US  
Average flow: 17,545 m<sup>3</sup>/s (~ 10 x Rhône)  
Length: 3,760 km  
Watershed: 3,238,000 km<sup>2</sup>  
Watershed population: approx. 72 million  
Countries crossed: US  
Main traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam

watershed  
maps

evocative  
photos



A young member of a Baptist church receives baptism by immersion in Lake Providence, Louisiana State, US.

### CHURCHES OF REFORMATION BAPTISM IN DEEP WATER

Fully immersed in the water, the believer emerges washed of their sins, now a full-fledged member of the Church. Among Christians, the water of baptism is a symbol of purity and life. In the baptismal rite, immersion also means the symbolic death of the believer's old life and their rebirth into a new life.

For Baptist churches, this type of baptism is the most faithful to the story of the Gospels in which John the Baptist baptized the adult Jesus in the Jordan River. That is why these churches only baptize people old enough to express their choice to publicly engage in the Christian faith.

Today these baptisms are mostly performed in artificial basins, usually inside ecclesiastical buildings. However, the tradition of baptism in rivers and lakes endures, particularly in the Mississippi delta and among local Baptist

churches, especially African American traditions. It thus perpetuates a legacy of its own.

These rites sometimes bring together several congregations. The ceremony is generally accompanied by choirs singing gospel songs and ancient spirituals.

By becoming Christians, slaves were inspired by the promise of liberation carried in the Bible, notably embodied in the figures of Moses and Jesus. In the African American spiritual "Deep River" one can find the line "Deep river / My home is over Jordan." The obligatory passage of the Hebrews toward the Promised Land, the Jordan symbolizes access to the paradise of the Kingdom of God.

For slaves, it also represented a difficult obstacle to overcome, much like the huge Mississippi itself, beyond which it was possible to reach a land without slavery. **Serge Lafitte**

pictograms  
to identifying  
each tradition

articles  
presenting  
the traditions  
and their spiritual  
practices