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.
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).
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 ☪, Bahá’í ☪ and Zoroastrianism ☪; as well as ancient religions ☪, ethnic traditions ☪ and civil society ☪.

OCTOBER 2020

- **CHINESE FESTIVALS**
  - 1 Zhongqiu: Mid-autumn festival in honor of the Moon. Moon cakes (yuebing) are eaten.
  - 13 Birth of Confucius*: Revered under the name of Master Kong, his teachings gave birth to the Confucian tradition in China.

- **SHINTO FESTIVAL**
  - 1 Kamiarizuki ("Month with Gods," all of October): The 8 million kamis of Japan meet at the Izumo shrine in Shimane Prefecture.

- **JEWISH FESTIVALS**
  - 3 Sukkot**: Festival of Tents or Huts, in memory of the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert during the Exodus. It includes a procession on Hoshana Rabbah (7th day) and a closing festival of Shemini Atzereth (8th day).
  - 11 Simhath 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 26): 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 evocation of spirits.

- **HINDU FESTIVALS**
  - 17 Navaratri / Durga Puja (October 17–24): Celebration of the goddess in her various manifestations: Durga, Kali, Uma, Sarasvati ...
  - 25 Dashahara: Celebration of Rama’s victory over the demon Ravana.

- **SIKH FESTIVAL**
  - 20 Feast of the Holy Book of Sikhs: Rise to the status of guru (gurgadi) of Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred book of the Sikhs.

- **MUSLIM FESTIVAL**
  - 29 Mawlid al-Nabi / Mulud****: 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.
*** Date varies depending on the country (according to the end of the rainy season).
**** Variable date (1–2 days) depending on the observation of the moon.
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 (IAGF).

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.
RIVER RITUALS AROUND THE WORLD

1. The Rosh Hashanah kibbutz Jews praying near the city of Uman, in the Southern Bug watershed (Ukraine).
2. Orthodox baptism festival at Lake Tana – Source of the Blue Nile, on the high plateau of Gojjam (Ethiopia).
3. When the gods sailed on the river – Ritual fishing of the Yawalapiti in a tributary of the Amazon (Mato Grosso, Brazil).
4. In agreement with the master of fish — Ritual fishing of the Yawalapiti in a tributary of the Amazon (Mato Grosso, Brazil).
5. Stone Ancestors – Anthropomorphic Inuit cairn at the mouth of the Churchill River (Hudson Bay, Canada).
6. Souls carried away by the waves – Shinto ritual of floating dolls near the mouth of the Kinokawa (Japan).
7. The Festival of the Sun – Hindu offering ritual in the waters of the Yamuna, a tributary of the Ganges (India).
8. The rebirth of a sacred river – Sikh faithful cleaning the Kali Bein, a sub-tributary of the Indus (Punjab State, India).
9. The Festival of the Sun – Hindu offering ritual in the waters of the Yamuna, a tributary of the Ganges (India).
10. The Dragon Boat Festival of the Taoists – Fluvial race on the Xiao, a tributary of the Xiang in the Yangtze watershed (China).
11. The Dragon Boat Festival of the Taoists – Fluvial race on the Xiao, a tributary of the Xiang in the Yangtze watershed (China).
12. Christian baptism in deep water – Lake Providence, Mississippi delta (Louisiana State, United States of America).
13. In agreement with the master of fish — Ritual fishing of the Yawalapiti in a tributary of the Amazon (Mato Grosso, Brazil).
14. The Festival of the Sun – Hindu offering ritual in the waters of the Yamuna, a tributary of the Ganges (India).
15. The Ivan Kupala summer festival – Slavic ritual in the Omsk region, in the Ob and Irtysh watershed (Russia).
16. Welcome to the Ancestor River – Maori welcoming ceremony on Whanganui (New Zealand, North Island).
17. When the gods sailed on the river – Ritual fishing of the Yawalapiti in a tributary of the Amazon (Mato Grosso, Brazil).
18. The rebirth of a sacred river – Sikh faithful cleaning the Kali Bein, a sub-tributary of the Indus (Punjab State, India).
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MISSISSIPPI
THE SOURCE OF GOSPEL

The small Lake Itasca is the only one, among thou-
sands composing Minnesota’s boreal forest, to be con-
sidered a true source of the Mississippi. Before the ar-
ival of Europeans, this region was the territory of the
Ojibwas, a North American peoples to whom the river
tooes its name, missiziibi 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 Appala-
chians in the east. The Missouri drains
the large cereal plains, and the Ohio, the indus-
trial 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 pro-
duction 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
Chicago for giving her golden voice to gospel music
and the negro spiritual. Born in the delta, in New Orle-
ans, Mahalia was baptized in the Mississippi’s waters
when she was 12 years old. Pierre Hugo

In the Bible, notably embodied in the figures of
Moses and Jesus. In the African American spir-
tuals, this 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 tradi-
tions. It thus perpetuates a legacy of its own. These rites sometimes bring together sev-
eral congregations. The ceremony is gener-
ally accompanied by choirs singing gospel
songs and ancient spirituals.

By becoming Christians, slaves were in-
spired by the promise of liberation carried
in the Bible, notably embodied in the figures of
Moses and Jesus. In the African American spir-
tual “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 ob-
stacle to overcome, much like the huge Missis-
sippi itself, beyond which it was possible to
reach a land without slavery. Serge Lafitte

Fully immersed in the water, the believer emerg-
es washed of their sins, now a full-fledged mem-
ber 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.

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