Water Impregnation in New Age Neopaganism

An essay.

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A Comparative Study of Elemental Ritualism across Five Traditions

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About the Author

Valentin B. Bura is an independent writer and essayist interested in comparative religion, ritual symbolism, and the hidden continuities between ancient traditions and modern spiritual movements. Exploring how physical elements like water, blood, and fire shape human devotion, his work examines the enduring grammar of sacred ritual in the contemporary world.

Synopsis

Water Impregnation in New Age Neopaganism offers a comparative inquiry into the persistent materiality of sacred ritual across five seemingly disparate religious traditions: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Samaritans, the Salvation Army, and the Church of Scientology. Challenging the conventional assumption that modern restorationist, revivalist, and technocratic movements have purged religion of archaic elementalism, this monograph introduces the analytical concept of water impregnation—the treatment of liquid not merely as a passive symbol of moral hygiene, but as an active, gestational medium through which an uninitiated mortal body is conceived anew into a bounded spiritual community.

Deploying a dual-lens methodology that pairs initiation rites (baptism and purification) with sustenance rites (Holy Communion and sacred meals), the study traces a five-stage ritual spectrum from total aquatic saturation to technocratic sublimation. Across submerged temple fonts resting on twelve sculpted oxen, stadium convention pools and untasted glasses of Memorial wine, spring-fed ablutions and dusk Passover sacrifices on Mount Gerizim, the Salvation Army's dry altar of "Blood and Fire," and Scientology's maritime discipline and sauna-based detoxification regimens, this work demonstrates that even in a disenchanted modern age, human devotion remains anchored to the primal bodily mechanics of immersion, purification, and elemental rebirth.

Elemental Theology — Defining Water Impregnation in New Age Neopaganism

This opening chapter establishes the theoretical vocabulary, comparative methodology, and structural roadmap for the monograph. It defines the central concept of "water impregnation"—the treatment of water not as a passive symbol of moral hygiene, but as an active, gestational medium that conceives a new ontological identity. It clarifies how the deliberately provocative terms "New Age neopaganism" and "cult" (cultus) are deployed across five seemingly incompatible traditions: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Samaritans, the Salvation Army, and the Church of Scientology. Finally, it outlines the book's dual-lens analytical framework—pairing initiation rites (baptism and purification) with sustenance rites (Communion and sacred meals)—to trace a five-stage arc from total aquatic saturation to technocratic sublimation.

1.1 The Paradox of the Sacred Liquid

In the disenchanted landscape of modern life, water is routinely treated as an inert industrial utility—a colorless chemical compound (H_2O) piped through municipal infrastructure, measured by utility meters, and stripped of all cosmological mystery. Even within mainstream Western Christianity, centuries of rationalist theology and liturgical domestication have largely reduced baptismal water to a polite visual metaphor: an outward token of an invisible inward grace, safely detached from any suggestion that physical liquid might actually do something ontological to the human soul.

Yet the moment one steps outside the bounds of conventional mainline orthodoxy and enters the ritual worlds of modern restorationist movements, ancient ethnoreligious enclaves, Holiness revivalists, and twentieth-century technocratic religions, that comfortable Cartesian boundary between dead matter and living spirit collapses. Across these fiercely distinct traditions, liquid—above all water, alongside its crimson twin, blood—reasserts itself as an active, boundary-policing, world-making force.

This book investigates that persistent elemental gravity through a comparative study of five movements that

rarely appear together in standard textbooks of religious studies: Mormonism (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Jehovah's Witnesses, the Samaritans, the Salvation Army ("the Salvos"), and the Church of Scientology. At first glance, these five communities share almost nothing in common. They span three millennia of history, four continents, and radically divergent worldviews—ranging from an ancient Israelite priesthood atop Mount Gerizim to nineteenth-century American millenarian movements, a Victorian British street-army fighting urban alcoholism, and a mid-twentieth-century movement built around science-fiction cosmology and biofeedback meters.

What binds them together is not shared doctrine, but a shared ritual grammar: each movement defines, boundaries, and births its spiritual community through how it handles—or deliberately refuses to handle—elemental liquids. Whether plunging initiates backward into illuminated temple fonts resting on twelve sculpted oxen, dunking converts in stadium swimming pools, washing in spring-fed mountain waters before slaughtering Passover lambs, abolishing fonts altogether in favor of tears at a wooden bench, or sweating out cellular toxins in high-heat saunas, every one of these traditions organizes salvation around an elemental threshold.

1.2 Establishing Terminology: Water Impregnation, New Age Neopaganism, and Cultus

Because comparative religious analysis succeeds or fails on the precision of its vocabulary, three core terms anchor the argument of this manuscript and require clear definition at the outset: water impregnation, New Age neopaganism, and cult.

Water Impregnation

In conventional liturgical studies, water rituals are almost universally categorized under the rubric of purification or cleansing—the removal of moral stain, ritual defilement, or spiritual dirt. While cleansing is undeniably present, the metaphor of washing fails to capture the deeper generative mechanics at work in high-demand ritual communities. When a convert descends into a recessed chapel font, an assembly pool, a natural spring, or a sweat lodge, they are not merely taking a spiritual shower. They are undergoing a conception.

We use the term water impregnation to describe this gestational function of sacred liquid. In this framework, water operates as an elemental womb—an artificial or

natural amniotic medium into which the old, uninitiated mortal body is submerged, suspended in brief respiratory death, and delivered back out into the world impregnated with a new ontological status, a new communal lineage, and a new spiritual destiny. Water impregnation is active rather than passive: the liquid medium itself acts as the reproductive matrix through which an outsider is gestated into an insider, or a mortal body is conceived anew for eternal life. Furthermore, as our dual-lens approach will demonstrate, this initial aquatic conception is almost always paired with a secondary liquid or dietary rite—a sacramental feeding that sustains the newly birthed spiritual organism over time.

New Age Neopaganism

To apply the label New Age neopaganism to groups like Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Samaritans, the Salvation Army, and Scientology is a deliberate, analytical provocation—not a claim that these communities worship Celtic deities, cast Wiccan circles, or stock crystals on their altars. Indeed, several of these movements view "paganism" as their mortal theological enemy.

Rather, we deploy New Age neopaganism as a structural diagnosis of how modern religious innovation re-enchants physical matter. Classic paganism was never defined merely by polytheism; at its core, pagan religion was an elemental materialism that located divine power directly inside physical substances, sacred geographies, bodily fluids, and exact ritual gestures. Modern secularism stripped matter of its sacred charge, reducing the physical world to dead atoms. What unites nineteenth- and twentieth-century restorationist movements—alongside ancient survivalist traditions that never underwent modern disenchantment—is their refusal to accept a purely abstract, disembodied spirituality. When Joseph Smith declares that "all spirit is matter," when the Samaritans insist that only naturally flowing living water (mayim chayim) can restore bodily sanctity on Mount Gerizim, or when L. Ron Hubbard treats mental trauma as physical mass lodged inside fat cells that must be sweated out in a sauna, they are practicing a distinctly modern, "New Age" form of neopagan elementalism—reclaiming physical elements as indispensable engines of spiritual transformation.

Cult (Cultus)

Finally, this study uses the word cult not as a sensationalist journalistic slur, but in its classical sociological and etymological root: the Latin cultus, meaning the organized system of ritual devotion, sacred boundary-maintenance, and embodied liturgy through which a group separates the sacred from the profane. Every high-commitment religious movement develops a cultus—a tightly choreographed set of bodily rules governing what enters the skin, what enters the mouth, and how the individual body is bound to the collective body. Liquid rituals are the sharpest instruments of cultus because liquids cross the physical boundaries of the human body—immersing the skin from the outside or passing down the throat from the inside—making abstract membership viscerally, biologically real.

1.3 The Dual-Lens Method: Initiation and Sustenance

To compare five wildly different traditions without flattening their unique histories, every case study in this book examines its subject through a consistent dual-lens sacramental framework:

1. The Rite of Aquatic Conception (Baptism and Purification): How does the movement use water—or a functional substitute for water—to initiate, cleanse, or rebirth the individual across the threshold from outsider to insider? We pay close attention to physical choreography: the architecture of the pool or sanctuary, the clothing worn, the exact verbal formulas spoken, the sensory experience of immersion or heat, and the role of community witnesses.

2. The Rite of Ongoing Sustenance (Holy Communion and the Sacred Meal): Once birthed into the community, how does the believer maintain their spiritual life through ingested elements—bread, wine, water, sacrificial meat, or electronic discharge? Pairing baptism with Communion reveals the complete circulatory system of each tradition: how the initial external threshold relates to the ongoing internal nourishment of the covenant body.

1.4 Synopsis of the Monograph

By moving systematically across our five case studies, the chapters that follow trace a coherent, five-stage trajectory—moving from total aquatic saturation, through gated abstinence, archaic literalism, and fiery abolition, to technocratic sublimation:

• Chapter 2: Mormonism — Total Immersion and the Watery Covenant explores how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints builds an unbroken aquatic ecology around the human lifespan. It examines full-immersion chapel baptism at age eight as an elemental womb, subterranean proxy baptisms for the dead in temple fonts resting upon twelve sculpted oxen, the weekly Sacrament in which plain tap water literally replaces Communion wine, and the temple initiatory rites of washing and anointing.

• Chapter 3: Jehovah's Witnesses — The Gated Cup and the Waters of Armageddon investigates the Watchtower movement's sharp division between accessible water and prohibited wine. It contrasts mass public full-immersion baptism at stadium conventions—where candidates vow allegiance to "Jehovah's organization"—with the annual Nisan 14 Memorial, in which unleavened bread and red wine are passed from hand to hand untouched by over 99.9 percent of attendees, policing the boundary between an anointed heavenly elite and an earthly flock.

• Chapter 4: The Samaritans — Living Water and Blood on Mount Gerizim steps back nearly three millennia to examine an ancient Israelite survivalist community as the archaic prototype underlying modern ritualism. It analyzes continuous ablutions in spring-fed living water (mayim chayim), ancestral reverence at Jacob's Well,

and the literal annual Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim, where unblemished lambs are slaughtered at dusk and fresh blood is daubed directly onto worshippers' foreheads.

• Chapter 5: The Salvation Army — The Dry Altar of Blood and Fire examines William and Catherine Booth's radical 1883 decision to abolish both water baptism and Holy Communion entirely. It shows how the Salvos traded fonts and chalices for tears at the wooden Mercy Seat, militant allegiance beneath the crimson-and-yellow flag of "Blood and Fire," ecstatic liquid metaphors in brass-band hymnody, and practical physical bathing in urban homeless shelters through "Soup, Soap, and Salvation."

• Chapter 6: Scientology — Technocratic Purification and the Maritime Womb brings the inquiry into the atomic and cybernetic age, analyzing L. Ron Hubbard's replacement of Christian sacraments with nautical and clinical technologies. It explores oceanic initiation and punitive "overboarding" in the Sea Organization, the multi-week sauna and niacin sweat-lodge regimen of the Purification Rundown, and E-Meter auditing across shiny tin cans as a dry, bioelectrical inversion of Communion.

• Chapter 7: Conclusion — Five Chambers of the Sacred Vessel synthesizes the findings across all five traditions, demonstrating that whether a movement worships

beside an ancient limestone mountain, a vinyl convention pool, a wooden penitent bench, or an electronic meter, human beings remain bound to the primal elemental logic of immersion, purification, and spiritual gestation.

Mormonism — Total Immersion and the Watery Covenant

This chapter examines how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints places water at the center of its theology and rituals. It explores total-immersion baptism as a physical and spiritual rebirth, the practice of baptism for the dead performed in temple pools resting on twelve oxen, the weekly Sacrament where participants drink water instead of wine, and the temple initiatory rites of washing and anointing. Through these practices, Mormonism treats the physical body and elemental water as inseparable components of eternal salvation.

1.1 The Womb of the Font

To step into a meetinghouse of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on a Saturday afternoon is to witness an architecture deliberately organized around a hidden cavity of water. In most modern chapels, the baptismal font does not sit openly at the threshold of the sanctuary like the stone basins of medieval cathedrals, nor is it tucked away as a decorative afterthought. Instead, it is recessed beneath the floor behind sliding partitions or glass panels—a tiled, subterranean chamber filled with warm water, accessed by descending steps on one side and ascending steps on the other. This spatial choreography is neither accidental nor merely practical. It establishes the central theological premise of Mormonism: that spiritual identity is not an abstract intellectual assent, nor a purely invisible stirring of the soul, but an embodied, elemental event. Before a human being can fully enter the covenant community, they must be physically swallowed by water and delivered back out of it.

In the vocabulary of comparative religion, this ritual mechanics exemplifies what we may term water impregnation—the treatment of water not as a passive detergent that washes away moral dirt, but as an active,

gestational medium capable of conceiving a new ontological person. Standard Protestant theology typically frames baptism as an "outward sign of an inward grace," a public declaration of a conversion that has already occurred internally. Latter-day Saint doctrine rejects that clean Cartesian split between matter and spirit. In Joseph Smith's cosmology, famously articulated in the Doctrine and Covenants, there is no such thing as immaterial matter; all spirit is simply a finer, purer form of physical substance. Consequently, when a Mormon candidate enters the font, the water is not acting as a polite metaphor. It is functioning as an elemental womb.

Consider the precise choreography of the Mormon baptismal ordinance, which has remained virtually unchanged since the early 1830s. The ritual begins not in infancy, when a child lacks moral agency, but at the age of eight—defined in Latter-day Saint scripture as the "age of accountability." Dressed entirely in white trousers and a white shirt or blouse, garments that immediately turn translucent and cling heavily to the skin upon contact with water, the candidate walks down the steps into the chest-deep font alongside an authorized male priesthood holder, also dressed in white. Two witnesses stand at the edge of the pool, watching intently to verify that the physical execution of the rite is flawless.

The officiator takes the candidate's right wrist with his left hand, while the candidate rests their left hand on the officiator's left wrist. The officiator raises his right arm to the square—bent at a ninety-degree angle, a formal gesture of celestial oath-taking—and pronounces the exact, unalterable formula recorded in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants: "Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

At that instant, the officiator places his right hand behind the candidate's back and lowers them backward beneath the surface until every inch of body, hair, and clothing is completely submerged. If even a stray lock of hair or the tip of a shoe breaks the surface tension—observed by the two witnesses standing sentinel at the rim—the ordinance is invalid and must be repeated immediately. The submersion must be total. For a suspended second or two, the initiate ceases to breathe air; they are suspended inside an artificial amniotic chamber, visually erased from the room. Then, with a decisive upward lift, the officiator raises them out of the water, gasping for breath, dripping, and visibly transformed.

To observe this sequence through the lens of New Age neopaganism is to recognize an ancient, elemental magic operating beneath the clean-cut surface of

nineteenth-century American restorationism. Neopagan traditions consistently treat the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—not as inert chemical compounds, but as living, threshold-crossing forces that mediate between worlds. Water, in particular, is the primordial abyss from which life emerges: the amniotic fluid of the Great Mother, the river separating the living from the dead, the mirror through which human beings glimpse their divine origin. Mormonism, despite its fiercely monotheistic rhetoric and clean white button-down aesthetic, preserves this archaic elementalism with startling literalism. The insistence that not a single strand of hair remain dry betrays a deeply magical sensibility: the ritual works only if the physical seal between the old mortal body and the watery element is unbroken.

Furthermore, the Mormon conception of baptism refuses to stop at the water's edge. In Latter-day Saint theology, emergence from the font is explicitly framed as only half of the birth process—the "birth of water," which remains incomplete until followed by the "birth of the Spirit," conferred shortly afterward when priesthood holders lay their hands directly upon the candidate's wet head to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost. Yet even here, the language of conception and gestation dominates. In the Book of Moses, part of the Mormon canon, Adam himself is told that just as human beings are born into the world by water, blood, and

spirit—the literal biological fluids of mammalian birth—so must they be born again into the kingdom of heaven by water, Spirit, and the blood of Christ.

By explicitly aligning the biological fluids of human gestation with the ritual elements of the covenant, Mormonism collapses the boundary between human reproduction and divine adoption. The font becomes a sacred uterus. To descend into the tiled cavity in white linen, surrender one's breath beneath the surface, and rise again is to undergo a controlled, communal rebirth in which the element of water impregnates the mortal body with celestial citizenship. And as we shall see when we descend deeper into the subterranean architecture of the Mormon temple, this watery womb is not reserved solely for the living.

1.2 Baptism for the Dead

If living baptism establishes water as an elemental womb for the mortal individual, the Mormon practice of baptism for the dead expands that watery jurisdiction across the boundary of the grave. Few religious practices in the modern world capture the imagination—or unsettle traditional Christian orthodoxy—quite like vicarious immersion for the deceased. Introduced by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo,

Illinois, in 1840, the rite rests on a startlingly literalist problem: if physical immersion in water is an absolute, non-negotiable legal requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven, what happens to the billions of human beings who lived and died without ever hearing the Mormon gospel or stepping into a font?

Mainstream Christianity solved this dilemma either through grim predestinarian exclusion or through vague appeals to invisible divine mercy. Mormonism, true to its materialist ethos, refused to bypass the water. If a soul in the spirit world lacks a physical body of flesh and bone, it cannot enter a physical pool of water; therefore, a living believer must lend their own body as a biological vessel, descending into the water on the ancestor's behalf.

To witness this ritual, one must enter the lowest level of a Latter-day Saint temple—a space intentionally positioned beneath ground level to symbolize the realm of the dead. At the center of the baptistry stands an architectural monument worthy of an ancient Near Eastern mystery cult: a massive baptismal basin resting directly upon the backs of twelve life-sized, sculpted oxen, arranged in four groups of three facing the cardinal points of the compass—north, south, east, and west. Modeled after the "molten sea" of Solomon's Temple described in the Hebrew Bible, the twelve oxen

represent the twelve tribes of Israel, bearing the weight of the sacred waters upon their shoulders.

Here, the symbolism of water impregnation reaches mythic proportions. Bulls and oxen have functioned across Mediterranean and Near Eastern paganism—from Minoan Crete to Mithraic mysteries—as primeval emblems of virility, fertility, and cosmic strength. In the Mormon baptistry, these twelve beast-pillars hold aloft a warm, illuminated pool into which teenagers and adults, dressed in white jumpsuits, descend for thirty or forty minutes at a time, undergoing rapid, consecutive immersions for a list of deceased relatives or historical strangers whose names appear on a digital screen beside the font.

The officiator raises his arm to the square and speaks a modified formula: "Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you for and in behalf of [Name of Deceased], who is dead, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Down goes the living proxy beneath the water; up they come, wiping water from their eyes, only to hear the next name read aloud seconds later. Down again, up again, twenty or thirty times in a single session.

Notice the profound metaphysical transaction occurring in this subterranean room. The living body becomes a conduit—a kind of ritual surrogate mother—allowing a disembodied spirit to undergo watery gestation by

proxy. In Latter-day Saint teaching, the deceased spirit in the afterlife retains full free will to accept or reject the ordinance being performed on earth; the water does not force salvation upon an unwilling ghost. Yet without the physical immersion of a living body in earthly water, the spirit remains legally unborn in the celestial hierarchy.

From a neopagan perspective, this is sympathetic magic elevated to an institutional scale. By linking genealogical bloodlines to physical water rituals, Mormonism transforms family history research into an engine of elemental necromancy—not the dark, coercive necromancy of medieval grimoires, but a bright, bureaucratic, redemptive necromancy in which water bridges the chasm between the living and the dead. The font on the twelve oxen operates as a cosmic umbilical cord. Through repeated, rhythmic plunges beneath the surface, the living community continuously births its ancestors out of spiritual limbo and into eternal kinship, proving that in Mormon theology, not even death can sever the soul's dependence on water.

1.3 Water as Blood: The Weekly Sacrament

While baptism initiates the believer into the watery covenant once for themselves (and repeatedly for the

dead), it is the weekly Communion service—known in Mormon parlance simply as "the Sacrament"—that reveals how thoroughly water has colonized the entire ritual imagination of the church. Across nearly two millennia of Christian history, the Eucharist has been defined by the pairing of bread and wine: the broken body and the shed blood of Christ. Even Protestant denominations that swapped fermented wine for unfermented grape juice in the nineteenth century preserved the visual and botanical symbolism of the crushed red grape—a dark, crimson liquid unmistakably evoking blood.

Mormonism broke that two-thousand-year visual chain. Every Sunday morning, in every Latter-day Saint chapel across the globe, congregations partake of broken white bread and tiny plastic or paper cups filled not with wine, and not even with purple grape juice, but with plain, clear tap water.

The historical origin of this substitution is preserved in Section 27 of the Doctrine and Covenants, dated August 1830. According to Mormon history, Joseph Smith was walking to purchase wine for a sacramental service when a heavenly messenger intercepted him, warning him not to buy wine or strong drink from his enemies, and declaring that it mattered not what the saints ate or drank in the sacrament, so long as they did it with an eye single to God’s glory. Over the following decades—

and especially as the church's dietary health code, the Word of Wisdom, hardened into a strict prohibition against alcohol in the early twentieth century—water completely replaced wine on the Mormon altar.

Yet in ritual studies, practical historical explanations never exhaust symbolic meaning. Once water stepped into the cup of the Lord's Supper, the entire theological chemistry of the ritual shifted. Consider the choreography of the Sunday Sacrament meeting, which unfolds with quiet, clockwork precision. At the front of the chapel sits the Sacrament table, draped in spotless white linen cloths that conceal trays of bread and trays of water cups beneath a second layer of white fabric—a visual shroud evoking the burial linens of Christ.

While the congregation sings a solemn Sacrament hymn, teenage boys holding the Aaronic Priesthood—typically aged twelve to fifteen—step behind the table, uncover the bread, and break the slices into bite-sized fragments with their bare hands. One of the boys kneels beside the table, folds his arms, and recites a fixed, word-for-word prayer over the bread, asking God to bless and sanctify it to the souls of all those who partake, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of the Son, and witness that they are willing to take upon them his name, always remember him, and keep his commandments. Young deacons then walk aisle by aisle through the silent congregation, passing silver or

metallic trays from row to row while members take a single piece of bread.

Once the bread trays are returned and re-covered, the second act begins. The cloth is lifted from the water trays, revealing concentric rings of tiny transparent cups filled with clear water. Another young priest kneels at the table and pronounces the second fixed prayer:

"O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this water to the souls of all those who drink of it, that they may do it in remembrance of the blood of thy Son, which was shed for them; that they may witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they do always remember him, that they may have his Spirit to be with them. Amen."

Listen closely to that liturgical formula: "bless and sanctify this water... that they may do it in remembrance of the blood of thy Son." In the Catholic Mass, wine becomes blood through transubstantiation. In Lutheran and Reformed traditions, wine spiritually conveys or symbolizes blood through its crimson color and intoxicating warmth. In Mormonism, colorless, tasteless water stands directly in the place of blood.

The symbolic consequences of this shift are profound. In Mormon theology, participating in the weekly Sacrament is explicitly understood as a renewal of the baptismal covenant. By drinking the tiny cup of water

each Sunday, the believer re-enacts their initial immersion from the inside out. At age eight, the body was plunged externally into the womb of the font; every seven days thereafter, the body ingests that same element internally. Water becomes a closed circulatory system of grace: outside the skin in baptism, inside the bloodstream in Communion.

Moreover, stripping away red wine removes the tragic, sacrificial harshness of blood-drinking—the visceral shock that made early Roman observers accuse Christians of cannibalism—and replaces it with the cool, transparent purity of elemental water. Blood is messy, mortal, and tied to trauma; water is regenerative, crystalline, and endlessly renewable. By transforming the blood of Christ into a weekly draught of sanctified water, Mormonism subtly shifts the emotional center of Communion from death on a cross to continuous elemental hydration—a weekly internal impregnation that keeps the baptismal rebirth alive inside the believer's flesh.

1.4 Washing and Anointing: The Temple Body

To trace water impregnation to its innermost sanctuary in Mormonism, we must return once more to the temple—beyond the subterranean baptistry on the

twelve oxen, into the private dressing rooms and sacred chambers where endowed members undergo the ritual known as the Initiatory, or the Washing and Anointing. If public chapel baptism initiates the child into the visible church, and weekly water-communion sustains the member in ordinary time, the temple initiatory consecrates the adult body as a royal, priestly, and ultimately divine organism.

Historically, in the nineteenth-century temples of Kirtland, Nauvoo, and early Utah, this ordinance involved a literal, full-body bathing in large tubs of warm water mixed with cinnamon or perfumed spirits, followed by an abundant pouring of consecrated olive oil over the head and body. Over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, to accommodate global temple attendance and modern sensibilities regarding modesty, the church streamlined the physical gestures while keeping the liturgical script intact. Today, candidates dressed in white ceremonial clothing enter small, curtained booths where temple workers of the same sex lightly touch a drop of water to the candidate's forehead—symbolically pronouncing blessings upon the head, eyes, ears, mouth, heart, loins, and feet—before performing a parallel gesture with consecrated olive oil.

Even in its abbreviated contemporary form, the ritual logic of the Washing and Anointing reveals an

unmistakably neopagan reverence for the sacred anatomy of the human body. Each sensory organ and bodily region is explicitly named and sanctified through the dual application of water and oil. Water comes first to cleanse and rebirth the mortal frame from the inherited stains of the fallen world; olive oil—extracted from the fruit of an ancient Mediterranean tree—follows immediately to seal, nourish, and empower the flesh for celestial kingship and queenship.

Immediately following this dual elemental touch, the initiate is clothed in the temple garment—sacred white underclothing bearing subtle sewn marks over the chest, navel, and knee—which practicing Mormons wear day and night beneath their everyday clothes for the rest of their lives. Look at the sequence of layering: first the naked skin is touched by water; second, it is anointed with oil; third, it is wrapped in a second white skin of woven cotton or linen.

Here, the motif of water impregnation reaches its architectural climax. In the chapel font, water surrounded the body temporarily before dripping away. In the Sunday Sacrament, water entered the mouth to refresh the covenant. In the temple initiatory, water and oil together prepare the body to wear its sacred boundary permanently. The temple garment acts as a dry, wearable membrane—a lifelong reminder of the watery womb from which the initiate emerged.

Taken as a whole, Mormonism constructs an unbroken aquatic ecology around the human lifespan. From the recessed font of childhood, to the weekly trays of tiny water cups, to the subterranean pools resting on twelve oxen for the dead, and finally to the whispered water-blessings of the temple booths, Latter-day Saint ritualism leaves no phase of existence untouched by water. Far from viewing matter as a prison from which the spirit must escape, Joseph Smith's restorationist vision turns water into the indispensable medium of apotheosis—the primal, gestational element through which mortal human beings are conceived, nourished, and resurrected into gods.

Jehovah's Witnesses — The Gated Cup and the Waters of Armageddon

This chapter investigates the ambivalent role of ritual liquids within the theology and organizational life of Jehovah's Witnesses. It examines public full-immersion baptism at regional assemblies as an act of binding organizational dedication, contrasts this universal aquatic entry with the annual Nisan 14 Memorial where unleavened bread and red wine are passed untouched by almost all attendees, and explores the eschatological waters of Watchtower literature. Through this sharp division between accessible water and prohibited wine, Jehovah's Witnesses construct a two-tier spiritual hierarchy policed by liquid boundaries.

2.1 Convention Pools: The Choreography of Organizational Dedication

If Mormonism surrounds the human lifespan with an intimate, domestic ecology of water—tucked behind chapel curtains, poured into weekly communion cups, and whispered over in temple booths—Jehovah's Witnesses stage their primary water ritual as a vast, industrial spectacle of public obedience. For a Witness, baptism does not occur in a quiet neighborhood meetinghouse before a handful of family members. Instead, it is reserved almost exclusively for large circuit assemblies and multi-day regional conventions held in rented sports arenas, exhibition halls, or specially constructed assembly complexes, where thousands of spectators watch from tiered stadium seating while dozens or hundreds of candidates walk down to an above-ground, vinyl-lined portable pool.

To understand what happens in that stadium pool, one must first strip away the mystical, sacramental atmosphere of traditional Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly reject the idea that water possesses any inherent spiritual power, cleansing grace, or mystical agency. In Watchtower theology, water is chemically and spiritually inert; it washes dirt from the flesh, nothing more. Yet in the lived ritual reality of the convention arena, the choreography surrounding that portable pool reveals an extraordinary obsession with physical precision, legal dedication, and boundary-crossing rebirth.

The process begins months before the convention, when a prospective convert—often after years of structured home Bible study using official Watchtower publications—must pass a rigorous oral examination conducted by local congregation elders. Divided into three lengthy sessions covering dozens of doctrinal and behavioral questions, this vetting ensures that the candidate has shed all "pagan" holiday observances, severed ties with former religious affiliations, abstained from blood transfusions and tobacco, and submitted wholeheartedly to the authority of the Governing Body—the small council of men in Warwick, New York, who direct the global organization. Only after surviving this doctrinal scrutiny is the candidate approved for the water.

On the morning of the convention baptism—traditionally scheduled for the Saturday morning session—the candidates sit together in a reserved block of seats near the front of the arena, dressed modestly in everyday clothing while carrying bags containing swimsuits, modest dark t-shirts or shorts, and towels. A designated speaker delivers a half-hour baptism discourse from the stage, reminding the candidates of the gravity of the step they are about to take. At the climax of the talk, the speaker commands the candidates to stand and answer two mandatory, verbatim questions in a loud, clear voice:

First: "Have you repented of your sins, dedicated yourself to Jehovah, and accepted his way of salvation through Jesus Christ?"

Second: "Do you understand that your baptism identifies you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with Jehovah's organization?"

Here lies the decisive liturgical pivot. Notice that in classic Trinitarian Christianity, the candidate is baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—a cosmic, mystical incorporation into the divine life. In the Watchtower formula, the Holy Spirit is removed from the baptismal vows altogether, replaced explicitly by "association with Jehovah's organization." Before a single toe touches the water, the ritual is framed as a binding, public corporate contract. The candidate is not merely dying with Christ; they are signing their body over to a visible terrestrial institution.

Immediately following the twin affirmative shouts of "Yes!" echoing across the stadium, the candidates file out to the changing rooms and emerge in swimwear—strictly regulated against anything revealing or immodest—lining up in single file beside the temporary pool. Inside the waist-deep water stand pairs of male elders wearing shorts and t-shirts. As each candidate steps down the ladder into the pool, an elder places one hand behind the candidate's back and the other over their nose and mouth, lowering them swiftly backward until the entire body is submerged beneath the surface, then lifting them upright within a second or two. Like the Mormons, Witnesses insist on total immersion; if a knee or a patch of hair remains dry, the elders immediately dunk the candidate a second time while attendants standing poolside nod approval.

Look past the anti-mystical disclaimers of Watchtower doctrine, and the neopagan elemental archetype reasserts itself with unmistakable force. Why does a movement so fiercely hostile to ritualism—a group that bans crosses, candles, vestments, incense, and liturgical calendars as Babylonian pagan corruptions—insist with absolute rigidity on full-body submersion in a pool of water? Because in the deep grammar of human ritual, water remains the universal threshold of ontological death and rebirth. By marching hundreds of initiates in single file into an artificial reservoir in the center of a crowded stadium, plunging them beneath the surface, and bringing them up dripping into the applause of thousands, the organization enacts a mass elemental conversion. The old worldly person drowns in the vinyl tank; a newly minted "dedicated publisher" emerges from the watery womb, legally bound for life—under penalty of total social shunning should they ever defect—to the collective body.

2.2 The Untasted Wine: The Annual Memorial of Abstinence

If Jehovah's Witnesses insist on total physical immersion in water as the universal doorway into the community, their approach to the second great Christian liquid ritual—Holy Communion—operates by the exact opposite logic: ritualized non-participation. Once a year, after sundown on the date corresponding to Nisan 14 on the ancient Jewish lunisolar calendar (typically in March or April), every congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide gathers in Kingdom Halls or

rented auditoriums for the Memorial of Christ's Death, the single most sacred evening of their religious calendar.

To step into a Kingdom Hall on Memorial night is to witness one of the strangest liturgical spectacles in modern religion—a Communion service in which the elements are consecrated, elevated, passed directly through the hands of every person in the room, and consumed by almost no one.

At the front of the hall sits a simple table covered with a clean white cloth. Upon the table rest two austere plates containing flat, crisp squares of unleavened bread—baked strictly from plain wheat flour and water without yeast, salt, or seasoning—and two simple glass goblets or carafes filled with unadulterated red wine, free of added sugar, spices, or fortifying brandy. Following an opening song and a forty-five-minute lecture explaining the ransom sacrifice of Jesus, an appointed elder steps to the platform, offers a solemn prayer of thanks over the bread, and signals to a team of male attendants standing at attention in the aisles.

What follows is a silent, choreographed relay race of avoidance. The attendants take the plates of unleavened bread and pass them down each row of seats. Every person in the audience—men, women, children, elderly lifelong Witnesses, and curious first-time visitors alike—takes the plate from their neighbor's hand, gazes down at the crisp white wafer for a fraction of a second, and passes it carefully to the person sitting next to them without touching the bread. Once every row has handled and refused the bread, the plates are returned to the front table. A second elder then steps forward, prays over the glasses of red wine, and

the exact same choreography repeats: goblet after goblet of dark crimson wine glides from hand to hand down every aisle, inspected respectfully at arm's length and passed along untouched, until the full glasses are returned to the table at the front of the room.

In over 99.9 percent of Jehovah's Witness congregations worldwide, not a single crumb of bread is eaten and not a single drop of wine is drunk.

To understand this extraordinary ritual of liquid abstinence, one must grasp the rigid two-class cosmology introduced by Watchtower president Joseph Rutherford in 1935. According to Witness doctrine, humanity is divided into two distinct spiritual destinies: a tiny, fixed elite of exactly 144,000 "anointed" Christians (drawn from the first century down to the present day) who are "born again" by the Holy Spirit to rule as immortal spirit-kings alongside Christ in heaven, and a vast "Great Crowd" of "other sheep"—comprising virtually all living Jehovah's Witnesses today—whose hope is not heaven at all, but everlasting physical life on a restored paradise earth after Armageddon.

In Watchtower theology, the bread and red wine of the Memorial represent the New Covenant, a legal contract reserved exclusively for the 144,000 heavenly rulers. Consequently, for an ordinary Witness belonging to the earthly class to eat the bread or drink the wine would be an act of spiritual presumption—claiming a heavenly kingship to which they have not been called. Only the vanishingly small number of individuals worldwide who believe themselves to be among the remnant of the 144,000 (roughly twenty-two

thousand people globally out of nearly nine million Witnesses) actually break off a piece of the unleavened bread and take a sip from the glass of red wine while the rest of the congregation watches in hushed, awe-struck silence.

Look at the profound symbolic tension created when we place the convention pool beside the Memorial wine glass. In Mormonism, as we saw in Chapter 1, water replaces wine in Communion so that every believer ingests the sacred liquid every Sunday—creating an egalitarian circulatory system of water impregnation. Jehovah's Witnesses enforce the exact inverse: water is democratic, while wine is aristocratic. Every convert is plunged into the convention pool, yet almost none may touch the cup of blood-red wine.

By requiring millions of believers to physically hold the glass of red wine in their hands once a year while strictly forbidding their lips from touching it, the Memorial transforms liquid into a potent instrument of hierarchical boundary-making. The wine is not merely ignored; it is ceremonially refused. Passing the untasted cup from palm to palm reinforces every Witness's exact ontological rank within the cosmic order: immersed in earthly water, bound to the terrestrial organization, and forever separated by an invisible glass wall from the heavenly wine of the anointed elite.

2.3 Eschatological Waters: Noah's Deluge and the River of Life

Because Jehovah's Witnesses restrict physical water ritual to a single moment of organizational baptism and prohibit physical participation in the wine of Communion, their immense religious imagination channels its elemental longing into apocalyptic liquid mythology. Across thousands of pages of Watchtower and Awake! magazines, illustrated Bible storybooks, and convention dramas, water re-emerges not as a quiet sacramental medium, but as the supreme cosmic weapon of divine judgment and the lifeblood of the post-Armageddon paradise.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the central place occupied by Noah's Flood in Witness eschatology. While many modern Christian groups treat the Genesis deluge as an allegory or a localized ancient catastrophe, Jehovah's Witnesses treat the global Flood of 2370 BCE as the exact historical blueprint for the imminent destruction of the modern world at Armageddon. In Watchtower iconography—repeated across decades of vividly painted illustrations—wicked humanity is depicted clawing desperately at jagged mountain peaks as black, churning torrents of wrathful water swallow cities, temples, and screaming unbelievers, while Noah's rectangular wooden ark floats serenely above the drowned earth.

In this apocalyptic drama, water functions as a cosmic purgative. Just as the convention pool drowns the convert's old worldly identity so a dedicated Witness can emerge, the

coming destruction of the "wicked system of things" is imagined as a planetary immersion that will wash away every government, rival religion, and unrepentant human being from the face of the globe. Salvation consists entirely of being inside the modern "ark"—the visible Watchtower organization—before the floodgates open.

Yet once the waters of judgment recede, Watchtower imagery immediately pivots to the opposite pole of aquatic symbolism: maternal nourishment and eternal hydration. Drawing heavily on the final chapter of the Book of Revelation, Witness publications portray the earthly paradise after Armageddon as a lush, park-like garden bisected by a sparkling "river of water of life, clear as crystal," flowing out from the throne of God and lined with fruit-bearing trees of healing. In Witness evangelism, truth itself is routinely described as "waters of truth"—a refreshing stream offered free of charge to spiritually parched people wandering through the desert of false religion.

Notice how water impregnation operates here through visual and literary immersion rather than liturgical sacrament. Denied incense, icons, holy water, liturgical dance, and even the taste of Communion wine, the rank-and-file Witness feeds their elemental imagination on hyper-saturated illustrations of crystal rivers, waterfall gardens, and rejuvenated human bodies drinking pure spring water in an endless earthly summer. Water is both the terror that drowns the outsider and the amniotic paradise that sustains the survivor forever.

When viewed alongside Mormonism, the contrast could hardly be sharper. Mormonism saturates the body directly—plunging the living into chapel fonts, plunging proxies into temple pools on twelve oxen for the dead, and pouring sanctified water down the throat every Sunday morning. Jehovah's Witnesses compress physical water into a single, stark doorway of corporate allegiance at a stadium pool, lock away the red wine behind a wall of annual abstinence, and project the full sensual richness of water forward into a promised earthly paradise. Yet in both movements, beneath their fierce rejection of traditional Christendom, the same archaic elemental logic governs the sacred community: only those who pass through the proper liquid boundary survive the death of the world.

The Samaritans — Living Water and Blood on Mount Gerizim

This chapter turns from nineteenth-century American restorationist movements to the Samaritans, an ancient Abrahamic ethnoreligious community centered on Mount Gerizim, to uncover the archaic elemental roots underlying modern ritualism. It examines the Samaritan doctrine of ritual purity (taharah) and full-body ablutions in living water (mayim chayim), explores the sacred geography of Jacob's Well as an ancestral womb of identity, and contrasts Christian symbolic Communion with the literal annual Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim. By placing this living ancient tradition alongside modern sects, the chapter illuminates how elemental water and blood operate as primal technologies of tribal survival.

3.1 The Ancient Archetype: Why Mount Gerizim Matters

At first glance, placing the Samaritans alongside Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Salvation Army appears to violate every convention of religious chronology. The Latter-day Saints and the Watchtower movement are products of nineteenth-century American revivalism, born in the wake of the Second Great Awakening and shaped by print culture, democratic individualism, and modern organizational bureaucracy. The Samaritans, by contrast, are one of the oldest continuous ethnoreligious communities on earth—an ancient Israelite remnant numbering fewer than a thousand souls today, divided between the village of Kiryat Luza atop Mount Gerizim near Nablus and the city of Holon near Tel Aviv.

Yet in a comparative study of water impregnation and elemental ritualism, the Samaritans are not an anomaly; they are the Rosetta Stone. To call modern restorationist sects forms of "New Age neopaganism" is to argue that beneath their nineteenth-century biblical literalism lies an archaic, pre-modern consciousness that treats physical elements—water, blood, stone, and sacred geography—as active vessels of spiritual life. The Samaritans preserve that archaic consciousness intact, unbroken across nearly three millennia. Looking at how the Samaritans handle water and blood reveals the raw, elemental prototype from which modern ritual movements—consciously or unconsciously—draw their symbolic power.

Claiming direct descent from the ancient northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (alongside a hereditary Levitical priesthood tracing its lineage back to Aaron), the Samaritans reject the later Jewish prophets, the Talmud, and the sanctity of Jerusalem. Their entire canon consists solely of the Samaritan Pentateuch—the Five Books of Moses, written in an ancient paleo-Hebrew script—and their entire spiritual universe revolves around a single sacred axis: Mount Gerizim, which they revere as the true "Chosen Place" where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, where Jacob dreamed of the ladder reaching heaven, and where Moses commanded the Israelites to proclaim blessings upon entering the Promised Land.

In this hyper-localized, fiercely endogamous cosmos, religion is never reduced to private inner belief or abstract moral philosophy. Holiness is physical, geographical, and biological. Just as ancient pagan cults anchored divine presence to a specific sacred grove, mountain spring, or oracle cavern, Samaritanism anchors divine presence to a specific limestone mountain in Samaria and regulates the human body's entry into that sacred space through an uncompromising regimen of elemental purity.

3.2 Mayim Chayim and Jacob's Well: The Grammar of Living Water

Unlike Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses, the Samaritans do not practice a one-time Christian-style initiation baptism

that permanently converts an outsider into an insider. Because Samaritan identity is inherited by bloodline and tribal covenant, one is born into the community rather than baptized into it at a convention pool or chapel font. Instead, Samaritan water ritual operates as a continuous, cyclical maintenance of bodily sanctity governed by the strict Levitical laws of taharah (ritual purity) and tum'ah (ritual impurity).

At the center of this system stands the ancient Near Eastern concept of mayim chayim—"living water." In Samaritan law, stagnant, artificial, or disconnected water cannot remove deep ontological impurity; only water that is naturally flowing, spring-fed, or gathered directly from rainfall without human mediation possesses the vital life-force required to restore a defiled body to sacred wholeness.

Consider how deeply this elemental logic shapes daily and weekly Samaritan life. Before entering the synagogue on the Sabbath, before reciting the ancient liturgy, and especially before ascending the sacred summit of Mount Gerizim for the three annual pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot), every Samaritan must undergo ritual ablutions. Following the exact prescriptions of the Pentateuch, hands, face, mouth, nostrils, ears, and feet are washed in a precise, unvarying sequence accompanied by specific blessings—a choreography strikingly parallel to, and historically older than, Islamic wudu.

Even more revealing are the laws governing full-body immersion following bodily emissions, menstruation, childbirth, or contact with death. In Samaritan observance,

human biological fluids—menstrual blood, seminal emission, the fluids of birth—are treated with intense awe because they carry the raw potency of life and mortality. When a woman completes her monthly cycle or recovers from childbirth, or when a man experiences a seminal emission, they enter a state of ritual separation that can only be resolved by washing their garments and immersing their entire body in pure water at sunset.

Notice how water impregnation operates here in its oldest, most literal form. In Mormonism, as we saw in Chapter 1, water acts as a symbolic womb birthing the initiate into celestial kinship. In Samaritanism, water works in direct dialogue with the biological womb itself. Every month, the female reproductive cycle and the elemental water cycle mirror one another: blood marks the threshold of potential life, and full-body immersion in water resets the body's sacred equilibrium, re-birthing the individual back into the pure communal space of the mountain.

Nowhere is this fusion of water, ancestry, and sacred geography more vivid than at Jacob's Well, situated at the foot of Mount Gerizim. Dug deep into the bedrock over a hundred feet below the surface to tap an underground perennial spring, this ancient stone shaft is revered by Samaritans as the literal inheritance dug by the patriarch Jacob for his descendants. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, it is beside this exact well that a Samaritan woman encounters Jesus, sparking a famous theological dialogue contrasting ordinary well water with mystical "living water" springing up to eternal life.

For the Samaritans themselves, however, there is no need to allegorize the well away into disembodied spirituality. The deep stone shaft descending into the dark belly of the earth, drawing up cold, sweet water from the hidden aquifers beneath Mount Gerizim, is the maternal artery of the tribe. To draw water from the ancestral well of Samaria is to drink the liquid memory of the patriarchs. Unlike modern suburban Christians who turn on a municipal chrome faucet without thinking of where the water comes from, the Samaritan encounters water as a sacred, localized gift emerging directly from the womb of the Holy Mountain.

3.3 Blood on the Mountain: The Mount Gerizim Passover

When we turn from baptismal water to the second pillar of our comparative framework—Holy Communion and the sacrificial meal—the Samaritans provide the most dramatic ritual spectacle in the Mediterranean world. While Mormons drink tiny paper cups of tap water on Sunday mornings, and Jehovah's Witnesses pass untouched glasses of red wine down carpeted aisles once a year, the Samaritans celebrate the annual Passover (Pesach) atop Mount Gerizim by slaughtering, roasting, and eating dozens of unblemished yearling lambs in strict accordance with the twelfth chapter of the Book of Exodus.

To witness the Samaritan Passover at dusk on the fourteenth day of the first lunar month is to step straight through a portal into the Bronze Age. Hours before sunset, the entire

Samaritan community—dressed in spotless white robes and red tarboosh caps—gathers around a stone-paved sacrificial compound on the ridge of Mount Gerizim, surrounded by deep circular stone-lined earth ovens (tannurim) blazing with wood fires.

As the sun touches the horizon and the High Priest chants the ancient Hebrew liturgy of Exodus, white-robed ritual slaughterers holding razor-sharp knives stand beside forty or fifty white lambs held steady in a circle. At the exact cadence of the High Priest's verse—"And the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at dusk"—every lamb's throat is severed simultaneously in a single, swift motion.

What follows is an unapologetic, visceral immersion in the element of blood. As warm crimson blood pours onto the stones, Samaritan fathers and priests dip bunches of hyssop and their own fingertips directly into the fresh blood, daubing bright red streaks across the foreheads and noses of their children and onto the doorposts of their nearby homes. The air fills instantly with the metallic scent of blood, woodsmoke, and chanting voices.

Within minutes, the slaughtered lambs are scalded with boiling water, stripped of their wool, salted, skewered on long wooden poles, and lowered vertically into the roaring stone pits, which are immediately sealed shut with heavy grates and mud plaster to roast in the subterranean heat. Around midnight, the earth ovens are unsealed, the roasted lambs are hauled out steaming onto large metal platters, and the entire community gathers in family clans to eat the meat rapidly—standing with belts fastened, sandals on their feet,

and walking staffs in hand, consuming the flesh with unleavened bread (matzah) and bitter herbs before burning every leftover bone and scrap to ash before dawn.

Pause and reflect on the staggering contrast between this ritual and the modern movements examined in Chapters 1 and 2. In Christianity—and even more radically in Mormonism and the Watchtower society—the bloody animal sacrifices of the ancient Near East were declared obsolete, replaced by a single historic crucifixion and commemorated through domesticated, bloodless table tokens: broken white bread, tap water, or untouched glasses of red wine.

The Samaritans never domesticated the sacrifice. On Mount Gerizim, water and blood remain unmediated, elemental absolutes. First, living water (mayim chayim) purifies the worshipper's exterior skin so they are fit to stand upon the holy mountain. Second, the blood of the lamb marks the worshipper's forehead as a protective apotropaic seal against the angel of death—the exact same protective boundary magic practiced across ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia. Third, the roasted flesh and unleavened bread enter the body internally, binding the tribe together in a midnight feast of shared life.

Seen through the lens of our study, the Samaritan Passover exposes the deep biological and pagan roots that later spiritualized religions tried to sanitize. Where Mormonism substitutes clear tap water for blood, and Jehovah's Witnesses forbid 99.9 percent of their members from even tasting red wine, the Samaritans smear real blood on their children's foreheads after washing their bodies in living

spring water. In doing so, they preserve the primal ritual equation intact: water conceives and purifies the vessel; blood seals and sustains the tribe.

And as we shall see in Chapter 4 when we turn to the Salvation Army, the pendulum is about to swing to its furthest possible extreme—a movement that abolishes physical water and physical wine altogether, yet screams "Blood and Fire!" across the industrial slums of the modern city.

The Salvation Army — The Dry Altar of Blood and Fire

This chapter examines the Salvation Army as a paradoxical revivalist movement that abolished both water baptism and the Lord's Supper. It traces William and Catherine Booth's rejection of physical sacraments as dangerous distractions from inward spiritual regeneration, analyzes the "Mercy Seat" penitent form and the red-and-yellow flag as a "dry baptism" of blood and fire, and explores how water imagery survived through ecstatic hymnody and the urban hygiene mission of "Soup, Soap, and Salvation." By stripping away liquid rituals altogether, the Salvos sublimate water impregnation into fiery social rescue.

4.1 Abolishing the Elements: The Great Sacramental Stripping

If Mormonism represents the total aquatic saturation of Christian ritual, and Jehovah's Witnesses enforce a rigid separation between democratic water immersion and prohibited wine, The Salvation Army—affectionately known across Australia, New Zealand, and the British Commonwealth simply as "the Salvos"—stands at the far extremity of our spectrum as a movement of complete elemental absence. Walk into any Salvation Army citadel on a Sunday morning, and you will find brass bands, uniformed soldiers, a raised wooden bench at the front of the hall, and a bold crimson-and-gold flag. What you will never find is a baptismal font, a bowl of holy water, a chalice of wine, or a plate of Communion bread.

In 1883, less than two decades after founding the Christian Mission in the impoverished slums of London's East End, William and Catherine Booth made one of the most radical liturgical decisions in modern religious history: they permanently abolished both water baptism and Holy Communion from the life of the Salvation Army.

To grasp the audacity of this move, one must appreciate that across nineteen centuries of Christian division—through the Great Schism between East and West, the Protestant Reformation, and the birth of thousands of competing denominations—nearly every Christian group disagreed on how to baptize and what happened to the bread and wine, yet virtually all agreed that Jesus had commanded his followers to perform both rites. Aside from the Quakers,

almost no major movement dared to discard the two foundational liquid rituals of the church.

The Booths, however, approached religion with the ruthless pragmatism of Victorian street generals fighting an urban war against poverty, alcoholism, and despair. In their view, physical sacraments had become fatal spiritual traps. First, they observed that millions of nominal Christians in Victorian Britain assumed that being sprinkled with water as an infant or taking bread and wine at Easter automatically guaranteed their salvation, lulling them into moral complacency while they lived unchanged lives. Second, William Booth worried deeply about alcohol addiction: in an era when gin palaces were destroying working-class families in London, Melbourne, and Wellington, placing fermented wine on an altar table posed a devastating physical temptation to recovering alcoholics newly rescued from the streets.

Yet beneath these practical concerns lay a profound theological conviction rooted in the nineteenth-century Holiness movement: outward physical elements cannot convey inward spiritual life. For the Booths, true baptism was not immersion in earthly water, but immersion in the Holy Spirit and Fire; true Communion was not eating a wafer or sipping wine once a month, but feeding daily upon Christ through sacrificial service to the poor.

In the vocabulary of our study, the Salvation Army executed a deliberate anti-pagan purge. Where Mormonism embraced the neopagan logic of sacred matter—insisting that physical water in a font or a paper cup is indispensable to salvation—William Booth declared war on material mediation. Water

was stripped of all mystical pregnancy; wine was banished from the sanctuary. Yet as any historian of ritual knows, when you expel elemental symbols from the front door of a religion, they inevitably climb back in through the windows of metaphor, hymnody, and bodily discipline.

4.2 The Mercy Seat and the Flag: A Dry Baptism of Blood and Fire

Having abolished the baptismal pool, how did the Salvation Army stage the moment of spiritual rebirth? If a broken street-dweller, a factory worker, or a penitent sinner came forward during an open-air street meeting or a Sunday citadel service seeking a new life, what physical choreography replaced the plunge beneath the water?

The Booths' answer was a simple, unadorned wooden bench placed directly beneath the pulpit at the front of the hall: the Mercy Seat, historically known as the penitent form.

Consider the ritual mechanics of the Mercy Seat. At the climax of a Salvationist meeting—charged with the rhythmic thumping of bass drums, the brassy swell of cornets, and urgent congregational singing—the commanding officer issues an altar call. Those seeking conversion, renewal, or sanctification leave their seats, walk down the center aisle, and kneel publicly upon the floor with their elbows resting on the wooden bench. Immediately, uniformed Salvationist officers and soldiers kneel beside them, placing hands on

their shoulders, weeping, praying aloud, and counseling them until the penitent experiences a visceral emotional breakthrough—a sudden inward flooding of peace, tears, and spiritual surrender.

Notice what has happened to water impregnation at the Mercy Seat. The external pool of water has vanished, replaced by tears and sweat on a wooden floor. Instead of being lowered backward into a tiled tank by an officiator, the convert collapses downward onto their knees in front of the community, undergoing a public death of the ego followed by an ecstatic emotional rebirth.

Even more revealing is the ritual that follows conversion when a believer decides to become a full uniformed Salvation Army Soldier. Rather than stepping into water, the recruit stands beneath the Salvation Army Flag—a vivid banner featuring a crimson field (symbolizing the blood of Jesus), a blue border (symbolizing purity), and a yellow eight-pointed star at the center (symbolizing the fire of the Holy Spirit)—and publicly signs the Articles of War (the Soldier's Covenant).

Look at the official motto emblazoned across the yellow star on every Salvation Army flag worldwide: "Blood and Fire."

In the elemental grammar of our four traditions, the Salvation Army's motto represents a dramatic alchemical substitution. Where the Samaritans combine living water and literal lamb's blood on Mount Gerizim, and where Mormonism turns water into blood in the Sunday Sacrament, the Salvation Army discards water completely and fuses Blood and Fire into a single militant emblem. In Salvationist

theology, fire replaces water as the primary medium of cleansing and gestation. Just as fire burns away dross, heats cold iron, and illuminates darkness, the "baptism of fire" is imagined as an invisible, scorching downpour of divine energy that incinerates sinful habits and conceives a fearless soldier of Christ.

During the swearing-in ceremony, the recruit salutes the flag—raising the right hand with the index finger pointing upward toward heaven—and vows total abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and worldly amusements, pledging their time, money, and body to the salvation of the lost. The uniform itself—dark navy blue serge trimmed with red and yellow epaulets—becomes their dry equivalent of the Mormon temple garment: a permanent, visible boundary marking their flesh as consecrated territory in the middle of a secular city.

4.3 Liquid Metaphors Without Liquid: Hymnody and "Soup, Soap, and Salvation"

Although the Salvation Army banned physical water from its liturgy, it never stopped singing about water. In fact, early Salvationist hymnody—much of it set to popular Victorian music-hall tunes and lively military marches—is saturated with aquatic imagery so vivid it borders on the hallucinatory.

Denied the tactile experience of stepping into a river or drinking from a chalice, early Salvationists poured their

elemental longing into lyrics about plunging beneath "a fountain filled with blood," bathing in "the crimson tide," drinking from "living streams," and drowning their sins in "the ocean of God's love." In the ecstatic atmosphere of an East End hall or an open-air street corner, singing at full lung capacity about plunging into cleansing floods functioned as a sonic baptism. The rhythm of the brass band and the collective vibration of voices washed over the congregation like an invisible wave, inducing the same sense of emotional immersion and communal rebirth that a Baptist or Mormon found in a physical pool.

Yet the Salvation Army's most concrete, everyday engagement with actual physical water occurred outside the sanctuary walls—in its famous three-part social gospel summarized by William Booth's maxim: "Soup, Soap, and Salvation."

Booth famously argued that you cannot preach the gospel to a man with empty stomach and freezing feet; you must feed him first, wash him second, and preach to him third. Across the industrial slums of London, Sydney, Auckland, and New York, the Salvos built homeless shelters, maternity homes, and public bathhouses where destitute men and women were given hot soup, clean beds, and—crucially—a hot bath with carbolic soap.

Pause and appreciate the poetic irony of this humanitarian innovation. Having expelled water from the religious altar because they feared people would confuse physical washing with spiritual regeneration, the Salvation Army immediately reinstated physical washing as the indispensable prelude to

evangelism in their urban shelters. For a homeless man covered in coal dust, lice, and street grime, stepping into a steaming Salvation Army tub with a bar of soap was a visceral, bodily resurrection—a literal washing away of the old life of degradation before sitting down to a bowl of hot soup and hearing the message of the Mercy Seat.

In this way, the Salvos secularized and democratized the ancient purification bath. They stripped water of its priestly mystery inside the church, only to restore its healing, life-giving dignity in the slum bathhouse.

Scientology — Technocratic Purification and the Maritime Womb

This chapter examines the Church of Scientology through the lens of water impregnation and elemental purification, framing the movement as a twentieth-century form of technocratic neopaganism. It explores L. Ron Hubbard's replacement of traditional Christian sacraments with pseudo-scientific and nautical initiation rites, including the maritime world of the Sea Organization, the physical detoxification regimen of the "Purification Rundown" (sweating out toxins in high-heat saunas), and the psychological cleansing of E-Meter auditing. By recasting ancient purification rituals in the vocabulary of engineering, chemistry, and naval discipline, Scientology demonstrates how elemental rebirth survives inside a hyper-modern technological mythos.

5.1 Technocratic Neopaganism: Replacing the Priest with the Engineer

If the Salvation Army abolished physical water and wine in the nineteenth century in order to wage an urban war of "Blood and Fire," the Church of Scientology—founded in the early 1950s by American pulp-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard—went a step further: it replaced the entire vocabulary of Judeo-Christian sacrament with the language of engineering, cybernetics, and clinical detoxification. On the surface, Scientology appears to be the ultimate anti-elemental religion. Its sanctuaries resemble sleek corporate headquarters or modern diagnostic clinics; its ministers wear sharp business suits or naval uniforms; and its sacred instruments are not stone fonts or silver chalices, but biofeedback devices, stopwatches, and bound volumes of technical bulletins.

Yet beneath this polished mid-century technological veneer lies a cosmology saturated with neopagan and Gnostic elementalism. In Hubbard's mythos, human beings are not mere biological creatures created out of dust; they are Thetans—immortal, godlike spiritual entities trillions of years old who created the physical universe—known by the acronym MEST (Matter, Energy, Space, and Time)—and subsequently became trapped inside it. Over countless past lives across distant galaxies, Thetans accumulated layers of traumatic mental scar tissue called engrams, binding them to the heavy, corrupting prison of physical matter.

In this light, Scientology's entire spiritual technology—collectively titled "The Bridge to Total Freedom"—is a monumental purification ritual designed to wash away the accumulated debris of MEST so the dormant god inside the human body can awaken. Where traditional religions use holy water, baptismal pools, and sacramental wine to conceive and cleanse the soul, Hubbard engineered an elaborate apparatus of sweat, maritime immersion, and electrical discharge to achieve the exact same archetypal goal: the elemental rebirth of the spiritual self.

Scientology does formally maintain a Sunday service and a brief liturgical ceremony called a Naming Ceremony—the closest equivalent to infant baptism—in which a Scientology minister introduces a newborn child to the community, assigns official godparents, and addresses the infant directly as an ancient Thetan newly arrived in a young body. Notably, however, no water is poured or sprinkled during the Naming Ceremony. Hubbard deliberately omitted water from the infant rite because, in Scientology's view, an infant does not need to be washed clean of "original sin." Instead, the real elemental initiation in Scientology happens later—through ocean voyages, chemical sauna purges, and the clinical precision of the auditing room.

5.2 The Sea Organization and the Ocean Womb

To find physical water occupying a central, mystical role in Scientology, one must look away from suburban churches

and turn toward the open ocean—specifically to the Sea Organization ("Sea Org"), the elite, quasi-naval monastic order founded by L. Ron Hubbard in 1967 aboard a fleet of ocean-going vessels in the Mediterranean and Atlantic.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hubbard literally took the upper leadership of Scientology out to sea, living aboard flagship vessels such as the Royal Scotman (renamed the Apollo) while sailing from port to port. In doing so, Hubbard transformed the physical ocean into the primordial womb of Scientology's inner elite. Just as ancient mystery cults retreated to isolated islands or sacred mountain springs to forge a brotherhood set apart from ordinary society, the Sea Org used the vast, trackless expanse of saltwater as an insulating moat separating awakened Thetans from the uninitiated "wog" world on land.

Even today, decades after Sea Org headquarters moved onto land bases in Clearwater, Florida, and Hemet, California, every single member of this inner order wears a dark navy-blue nautical uniform complete with gold braid, lanyards, and naval rank insignia, addresses superiors as "Sir," refers to dining halls as "berthing" or "mess decks," and signs a billion-year contract pledging their immortal Thetan to serve the organization across countless future lifetimes.

Inside this maritime subculture, physical water baptism re-emerged in a raw, unvarnished, quasi-pagan rite of passage known informally among Sea Org veterans as "overboarding." During the flagship years—and in modified forms during later maritime training—crew members who committed serious breaches of naval discipline or failed

critical operational targets were ceremonially thrown or ordered to jump overboard from the deck of the ship into the deep ocean water below.

Look past the punitive surface of "overboarding," and the ancient elemental archetype shines right through. To be cast off the wooden deck of the vessel, plunge violently into the cold, enveloping saltwater of the open sea, surface gasping for breath, and climb back aboard dripping wet is a textbook ordeal by water—the exact structural twin of baptismal death and resurrection. In the aquatic mythology of the Sea Org, the ocean was never merely a transportation highway; it was an unforgiving maternal abyss that tested the loyalty of the crew, washed away earthly incompetence, and forged a hardened, immortal naval priesthood.

5.3 The Purification Rundown: Sweating Out the Past

While the Sea Organization reserves its maritime symbolism for Scientology’s full-time monastic core, every ordinary Scientologist stepping onto the lower rungs of the Bridge to Total Freedom undergoes a mandatory physical ritual that functions directly as Scientology’s elemental baptism: the Purification Rundown (often called simply "the Purif").

Introduced by Hubbard in the late 1970s, the Purification Rundown is a grueling, multi-week detoxification regimen lasting anywhere from two to five weeks, performed inside dedicated sauna suites located inside every major Church of

Scientology facility worldwide. Framed in pseudo-medical terminology as a method for flushing out residual street drugs, prescription medications, alcohol, pesticides, and nuclear radiation supposedly lodged permanently inside human fat cells, the Purif is, in ritual reality, a modern sweat-lodge initiation remarkably parallel to Indigenous North American inipi ceremonies and ancient Greco-Roman thermal baths.

Consider the strict, unvarying daily choreography required of every initiate undergoing the Purification Rundown:

First, the participant arrives at the facility and ingests a carefully calibrated dose of niacin (Vitamin B3) alongside a cocktail of vitamins, minerals, and cold-pressed vegetable oils. Within thirty to sixty minutes, the high dose of niacin triggers an intense physiological reaction known as the "niacin flush"—dilating blood vessels near the skin and causing the initiate’s face, chest, and limbs to turn bright crimson, accompanied by a prickly, burning heat that participants are taught to interpret as old radiation and chemical toxins unlocking from their cellular tissue.

Second, the participant enters a dry wooden sauna heated to between 140°F and 180°F (60°C–82°C), remaining inside for up to four to five hours every single day, punctuated only by brief cold showers to rinse away the pouring sweat and regular rehydration with water and electrolytes (specifically Cal-Mag, a liquid mixture of calcium, magnesium, and apple cider vinegar).

Third, throughout the four-hour heat ordeal, the initiate keeps meticulous written logs of every physical sensation,

emotional memory, or drug-like flashback that surfaces while sweating—believing that as the body's water leaves through the pores, trapped mental images from past traumas and past lives are simultaneously dissolving. The ritual concludes only when a trained "Purification Case Supervisor" determines that the initiate has achieved a specific subjective breakthrough, marked by clear-eyed euphoria and the disappearance of all bodily flushing.

Pause and examine the elemental alchemy of the Purification Rundown alongside the other movements in our study. In Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses, water enters from outside the body—the candidate steps into a font or portable pool so external water can surround them. In Scientology's Purif, the water comes from inside the body out. By swallowing large quantities of water and Cal-Mag, swallowing oil and niacin, and sitting for dozens of hours in blistering dry heat, the initiate forces their own internal bodily fluids to erupt through millions of sweat glands, literally washing the mortal flesh from the inside out.

Here, water impregnation is inverted into water expulsion: the polluted, drug-stained fluid of the old worldly body is sweated out into towels and washed down shower drains, while pure, mineral-rich water is continuously poured back into the stomach until a clean, transparent physiological vessel is born. Only after completing this bodily purgation is the Scientologist deemed chemically and energetically clear enough to ascend to the upper levels of spiritual auditing.

5.4 E-Meter Auditing and the Dry Communion of the Mind

If the Purification Rundown serves as Scientology's bodily baptism, what occupies the structural position of Holy Communion—the ongoing, repetitive ritual that sustains the believer and binds them to the sacred community? In Scientology, that role belongs to Auditing (from the Latin audire, "to listen"), performed across a small table with the aid of the Hubbard Electrometer, universally known as the E-Meter.

To step into an auditing room is to observe a ritual stripped of every traditional sensory indulgence—no bread, no wine, no tap water, no incense, no hymns. Across a clean, uncluttered desk sit two people: the Auditor (a trained Scientology minister) and the Preclear (the initiate working toward the exalted state of "Clear"). Between them sits the E-Meter—a briefcase-sized electronic box fitted with a sweeping analog needle dial and connected by two cords to a pair of empty, shiny tin soup cans held firmly in the Preclear's left and right hands.

As the Preclear grips the cold metal cans, a tiny, imperceptible trickle of low-voltage electrical current passes through their palms and arms, measuring minute fluctuations in skin resistance—the galvanic skin response—whenever an emotional charge is triggered. The Auditor asks a precise, scripted series of repetitive questions designed to locate hidden traumas, secrets, or past-life incidents, watching the sweeping needle on the meter dial with intense concentration.

Whenever the Preclear confesses a buried transgression or confronts a painful memory, the needle executes a specific sweeping motion across the dial known as a "Floating Needle"—signaling that the negative spiritual charge has been discharged from the mind. At that exact moment, the Auditor smiles, stops the session, and pronounces the ritual declaration: "That's it!"

Look closely at the exchange taking place across that wooden desk. In traditional Christian Communion, the believer ingests physical bread and wine—taking sacred matter into the body to receive forgiveness and spiritual nourishment. In Scientology auditing, the flow moves in the exact opposite direction: spiritual confession flows out of the mouth and hands into a machine. The shiny metal cans held in the Preclear's palms act as modern, secularized chalices; instead of drinking wine from a cup, the initiate grips two cylindrical vessels and discharges invisible psychic toxins through their sweat-moistened skin into an electronic needle.

Taken together, the Sea Org ocean, the Purification Rundown sauna, and the E-Meter auditing table reveal that L. Ron Hubbard never truly escaped the elemental gravity of ancient religion. He merely rebranded it for the atomic and cybernetic age. Where the Samaritans wash in spring-fed living water and smear lamb's blood on Mount Gerizim, and where the Salvation Army trades fonts for tears at the wooden Mercy Seat, Scientology turns sweat, saltwater, and galvanic skin moisture into a sleek, clinical liturgy of self-deification. Even in a religion built by a science-fiction writer, the human soul still insists on sweating, plunging, and bleeding its way back to purity.

Conclusion — Five Chambers of the Sacred Vessel

This brief concluding chapter synthesizes the comparative trajectory of the monograph, reviewing how each of the five traditions deploys, restricts, literalizes, abolishes, or technologically reinvents elemental liquids to conceive and boundary-police its sacred community.

Across five distinct religious worlds, this study has traced a single, persistent elemental thread: the enduring power of water impregnation—the treatment of liquid not as a polite symbol of hygiene, but as a gestational threshold through which the old mortal self dies and a new spiritual person is conceived. Even in a disenchanted modern age, movements that claim to reject paganism or outgrow ancient ritual consistently fall back upon a distinctly neopagan elementalism, using water, blood, sweat, and fire to make spiritual identity viscerally real inside the human body.

Looking back across our five case studies reveals a complete, five-chambered anatomy of how sacred communities govern liquid boundaries:

• Chapter 2 (Mormonism — Total Aquatic Saturation): We saw how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wraps the entire human lifespan—and the afterlife—in water. From full-immersion chapel fonts at age eight, to subterranean proxy baptisms for the dead resting upon twelve sculpted oxen, to weekly Sunday Sacrament services where plain tap water literally replaces Communion wine, Mormonism constructs a closed circulatory system in which water functions as both the external womb of rebirth and the internal lifeblood of the covenant.

• Chapter 3 (Jehovah's Witnesses — Gated Liquid and Spiritual Rank): We observed how the Watchtower movement splits liquid ritual into two opposing poles. Universal full-immersion baptism in stadium convention pools binds every convert to "Jehovah's organization," while the annual Nisan 14 Memorial passes unleavened bread and

red wine untouched through the hands of millions—using ritualized liquid abstinence to police the strict boundary between an anointed heavenly elite and an earthly flock.

• Chapter 4 (The Samaritans — The Archaic Elemental Root): Stepping back nearly three millennia to Mount Gerizim, we uncovered the living Near Eastern prototype beneath modern ritualism. Through continuous ablutions in spring-fed living water (mayim chayim), ancestral reverence at Jacob's Well, and the literal dusk slaughter and blood-daubing of the annual Passover lambs, the Samaritans preserve the primal equation intact: living water purifies the vessel from without, while sacrificial blood seals and sustains the tribe from within.

• Chapter 5 (The Salvation Army — The Dry Altar of Blood and Fire): We witnessed William and Catherine Booth execute a daring liturgical reversal—abolishing both water baptism and Holy Communion in 1883 so outward elements would never replace inward transformation. Yet even on a dry altar, elemental longing surged back through tears at the wooden Mercy Seat, militant allegiance beneath the flag of "Blood and Fire," ecstatic liquid hymnody, and practical hot baths in urban shelters through "Soup, Soap, and Salvation."

• Chapter 6 (Scientology — Technocratic Sublimation): Finally, we watched L. Ron Hubbard translate ancient purification into the vocabulary of engineering, cybernetics, and naval discipline. From oceanic initiation and punitive "overboarding" in the Sea Organization, to sweating out cellular toxins in the high-heat saunas of the Purification Rundown, to discharging spiritual trauma through sweat-

moistened palms gripping E-Meter tin cans, Scientology proves that even a religion built for the atomic age cannot escape the bodily mechanics of purgation and rebirth.

Whether descending into a tiled temple font, passing an untasted goblet down a Kingdom Hall aisle, washing in a mountain spring, kneeling at a wooden penitent bench, or sweating in a cedar sauna, the human religious imagination returns endlessly to the same elemental truth: to be born anew, the body must pass through the threshold of the vessel.

