

Loving Water: In Service of a New Water Ethic

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that a new water ethic is needed in light of the global water crisis, an ethic that responds to contemporary water issues as it draws from the values embedded within the rich religious and spiritual traditions of the world. This paper explores how a new water ethic could gain much from the Hindu concept *seva* (loving service) that arises from the traditions of *bhakti yoga* (loving devotion) and *karma yoga* (altruistic service). Drawing from David Haberman's work with the Yamuna River of Northern India, I investigate how the concept of *seva* has been recently used in the context of environmental activism that promotes restoration efforts of the Yamuna River, a river worshiped by many as a goddess of love.

Keywords: bhakti yoga, karma yoga, love, service, seva, water ethic, water crisis, Yamuna River.

“There is only one question: / how to love this world.” (Oliver, 1990, p. 6)

These words by Mary Oliver in her poem “Spring” beautifully and succinctly sum up our current task as humans. At a time of impending ecological crisis, it is crucial that we humans learn how to love and care for our planetary home again. Living together with a vast diversity of life forms, we co-inhabit a “blue planet,” for Earth, like the human body, is composed of 70 percent water. In the spirit of Oliver’s “Spring,” I would like to rephrase the “one question” to ask *how to love this watery world*. Let me rephrase it in a slightly different way and ask *how to love the waters of the world*. I find these questions to be extremely relevant in light of the global water crisis of the 21st century, which includes multiple crises pertaining to issues of pollution, scarcity, over-pumping, damming and diverting, desertification, inequitable distribution, and the uncertain effects of global climate change on the hydrological cycle. Asking how to love the waters of the world, how to love our watery home, is of utmost importance at this critical time.

Given the urgency of the looming global water crisis, it is imperative that we reinvent our relationship to water and cultivate a new water ethic. One such ethic could be enacted by responding to contemporary water issues while drawing from the values embedded within the rich religious and spiritual traditions of the world. In this paper, I explore how a new water ethic could gain much from the concept of *seva* (loving service), a concept that arises from the Hindu traditions of *bhakti yoga* (loving devotion) and *karma yoga* (altruistic service). Drawing on David Haberman’s research that he published in his book *River of Love in an Age of Pollution*:

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The Yamuna River of Northern India (Haberman, 2006), I illustrate how the concept of *seva* has informed environmental activism. *Seva* has been a concept traditionally understood as loving service in the form of devotional worship of the river (often accompanied by flowers, candles, incense, food, hymns, and more). In the past couple of decades, the meaning of *seva* has slowly expanded to include not only devotional worship but also environmental activism that is working toward restoration efforts of the Yamuna River.

I visited India for the first time during the winter of 2010-2011, and I had the good fortune of seeing the Yamuna with my own eyes. I was invited to go to India to participate in an interdisciplinary conference about the Yamuna River organized by the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University and co-sponsored by Yale University and TERI University in Delhi.² I would like to share some of the things I learned about the Yamuna that were motivated by my travels in India.

The Yamuna flows from the Himalayan glacier Yamunotri down into the plains of Northern India, where it merges with the Ganges River at Allahabad, and the combined rivers flow to the Bay of Bengal and merge with the Indian Ocean. The Yamuna is the main tributary of the Ganges, and in many ways, the Yamuna and the Ganges are very similar. For instance, these two rivers are considered to be two of the holiest rivers of India.

Many Hindus who live near the Yamuna and rely on it for their daily needs also worship this river as a goddess of love, a divine mother who lovingly nurtures her children with her waters. These waters of the loving mother goddess flow through holy pilgrimage sites, such as Yamunotri, Braj, Vrindaban, and Allahabad, where many gather to worship this sacred river. Yamuna is known as the daughter of Surya, the sun god, and the sister of Yama, the god of death. The goddess's love affair with Krishna is said to manifest continually in the liquid love that is the river. The poet-saint Govindaswami of the 16th century offers this poem about Yamuna's love with Krishna, Lord Govinda:

Being united with Dark Krishna, Shri Yamuna herself is dark.
Her flow of drops of love sweat rushes toward her beloved ocean.
She is like a young lover who is so restless that she cannot remain in her own home.
Look at her beautiful form; she surpasses millions of cupids.
She makes love with Krishna, the young holder of Mount Giriraj.
Lord Govinda becomes exceedingly happy while looking at her.
She comes to him like a new bride.
(Govindaswami, as quoted in Haberman, 2006, pp. 203-204)

The Yamuna is not only similar to the Ganges insofar as both are holy rivers, but also because these holiest of rivers are extremely polluted—indeed, two of the most polluted in India. While the Yamuna River is revered by many Hindus as a mother goddess of love, this river is severely polluted as it flows through the intensely populated city of Delhi. The river is transformed into a sewage drain as large amounts of untreated municipal and industrial effluent are released into the water, making the river unsafe to bathe in and the waters dangerous to drink. Large quantities of the river are extracted for agricultural, industrial, and domestic purposes, such that the rate of

² For more about this conference, visit: <http://fore.research.yale.edu/Yamuna-River-Conference>

flow of the river is drastically slowed during the trek to join the Ganges. In some pilgrimage sites like Vrindaban, the river is flowing so slowly and with such a large amount of pollution that the waters have become stagnant and toxic. When I saw the river while I was in Vrindaban, the water level was incredibly low (compared to the water level lines marked on the *ghats*, the steps leading down to the river), and the banks of the river were full of trash.

In his research, David Haberman has encountered three types of responses from Yamuna devotees in Braj regarding the modern pollution of the river. He recounts the following:

Some denied that the pollution has any real effect on the river goddess or on living beings dependent on her; some acknowledged that the pollution harms living beings who come in contact with the water but does not affect the river goddess herself; and some contended that the pollution is having a harmful effect on beings who come in contact with the water as well as on the river goddess herself. (Haberman, 2006, p. 133)

Haberman (2006) goes on to link these distinct views concerning pollution to particular ways that the Mother theology surrounding the river is understood and applied by the three groups. He says:

For the first, Yamuna is an all-powerful Mother who is not affected by the pollution and who takes care of her children no matter how naughty they are. The second group agrees that she is an all-powerful Mother unaffected by pollution, but posits limits to her forgiveness, suggesting that she will not protect those polluting her, and that she may even punish them with the horrible diseases caused by the human-generated pollutants themselves. The third group views Yamuna as an ailing Mother who is herself affected by the pollution and who is in need of the loving care of her devotees. (p. 138)

As Haberman notes, those who believe that the goddess Yamuna is affected by physical pollution are much more likely to engage in acts to protect the river than those who do not see the goddess closely connected to the physical river. This third group of Yamuna devotees has helped to broaden the meaning of *seva* (loving service) from its traditional religious context of devotional worship to include activities that could be classified as environmental activism. Devotional service to the mother goddess of love has inspired the creation of educational programs to raise environmental awareness and clean up the river, along with public interest litigation that has been effective in building sewage treatment plants, determining minimum flows for the health of the river, and holding polluting industries accountable. Here, ecological restoration efforts are encouraged as a way of enacting Yamuna *seva*, loving service to the goddess.

Environmental activism performed in the spirit of Yamuna *seva* is an example of applied, community-based service learning. This service learning seeks to develop greater water consciousness by integrating education about water issues into pedagogy at the same time that it is actively cultivating a water ethic based on love and service. I tell this story of Yamuna *seva* in hopes that those of us who are not Hindus living along the banks of this river might be inspired to love and care for the waters with which we interact. Learning how to be of service to water is an act of love that can rebuild our relationship to our watery home.

I would like to suggest that we consider creating a new water ethic based on love, service, and loving service. This topic inspires me, because I feel strongly that love is a quite powerful motivating force for change, perhaps even *the most* powerful motivating force for change. I feel that love can be the ground, the center, the focus, the drive for environmental consciousness, environmental ethics, and environmental activism. For when we love something or someone, we care for them; we actively work toward their wellbeing, happiness, health, and flourishing. Love, compassion, care, and concern can transform our lives and our relationships with others and the world in which we live. As Rumi so eloquently says, “Let the beauty we love be what we do./ There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground” (Rumi, 1997, p. 36).

So how can we love water? What would it look like to kneel and kiss water? There are hundreds of ways! In my humble opinion, learning how to love water entails respecting water as a sacred source of life, not merely as a resource for humans to use. This involves making sure that water is kept clean and healthy so that it can support the numerous life forms within the diverse watersheds around the world. Learning how to love water also involves recognizing that humans and other forms of life are water bodies (we are bodies full of water), and making sure that everyone has his or her fair share of water to survive before allowing some to have more than enough. Yet another aspect of learning how to love water implies learning to regard water as an agent, an actor, an active member of the Earth community, which means that water’s voice would be heard and represented when determining policy. Learning how to love water also entails cultivating a deep reverence for water, so that we hold water to be a sacred, precious gift, a holy other mystery. By learning to love water, we can develop a mutually enhancing relationship with our watery world. Loving water will motivate us to serve water and will ensure that we will continue to be served by water for generations to come.

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