

RETHINKING CLEAN: HISTORICISING RELIGION, SCIENCE AND THE PURITY OF WATER IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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French philosopher Gaston Bachelard proposed that we in the present, conditioned as we are in a highly specific understanding of water as 'H₂O', produce overly specific and, in his words, *overly clever* readings of water's history. That is, we assume that past interpretations of water share our understanding of its qualities. In this paper, we propose that a narrow focus on the contemporary scientific dimensions of water purity has overlooked the nuanced and complex historical narratives of the imagination and management of water as an entity of moral force, particularly with regard to water purity. In our view, water purity is a philosophical problem as much as it is a physiological and socioeconomic problem. Understanding the history of our standards regarding clean or unclean water leads us closer to an understanding of the anxieties this problem evokes.

The historical narrative of water purity tends to chart a process of secularisation with an increasing importance on cleanliness. We suggest otherwise – that rhetorically at least, water has never been secularised. Moral impurity and water contamination have a long and interrelated history. Even before the connection had been made between contaminated water and disease, baptismal ideas had long fostered associations of hygiene and piety. The predilection for public bathing during Roman times continued long into the Middle Ages. Although John Wesley had pithily declared, 'Cleanliness is next to godliness' in the eighteenth century, it was not until the following century that his words would help to transform the habits of the upper classes of Britain and North America. Invariably, these notions were translated into ideas of moral hygiene. A polarity was established between the clean and the unclean, the refined and the coarse, the disciplined and the disorderly. Through the provision of clean, piped water and flushing of wastes, the sanitary engineer therefore, facilitated acts of physical and moral purification and civilisation.

In this paper, we explore temporally diverse narratives to historicise the pre-modern imaginings of water cleanliness that have shaped our inheritance of hydrological thought in the twenty-first century. We argue that the pre-modern story of water purity has been tangled with spiritual and instrumentalist narratives, which continue to exert strong influences on the seemingly pragmatic decisions of contemporary water management regarding cleanliness. Unravelling these pre-modern streams of thought may go some way, we consider, to

reimagining the cultural and spiritual meanings of water and its quality in the twenty-first century.