

Holy Water in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Die Verwendung von geweihtem Wasser außerhalb der Feier der Taufe ist allgemeine Praxis in den heutigen Orthodoxen Kirchen der byzantinischen Tradition. Da an Epiphanie der Taufe Jesu gedacht wird, gehört die Weihe des Wassers im byzantinischen Ritus wesentlich zu diesem Festtag, an dem ursprünglich auch vorrangig getauft worden ist. Der Beitrag erläutert die verschiedenen Riten zur Weihe des Heiligen Wassers und erschließt deren Bedeutung.

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The consecration of holy water and the rite of exorcism

The consecration of holy water and the rite of exorcism are two types of occasional services that are thematically and ritually linked with the celebration of baptism in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Exorcism and the consecration of water are significant elements of the solemn rite of Christian initiation in the Eastern Orthodoxy,¹ but the liturgical books also contain rites for the extra-baptismal consecration of holy water² and various exorcistic prayers for deliverance from evil spirits, the evil eye (βασκανία),³ and illnesses.⁴ Despite the fact that exorcism and the consecration of water are elements of the rites of Christian initiation in many Christian traditions, and thus would be the natural starting point of ecumenical theological reflection on these themes, it is worth noting that the 1982 WCC convergence document “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” neglects to reflect on these themes in its section on baptism.⁵

The status of exorcism in contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy is ambivalent. The 2022 draft for a proposed official Russian Orthodox document on exorcism notes that extra-baptismal exorcism has fallen into disuse in several Eastern Orthodox Churches, plays a prominent role in only a couple, and is a marginal phenomenon in the rest.⁶ The concept of demonic possession is vague in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and often overlaps with the concept of the evil eye in folklore and popular piety.⁷ The Church of Greece publishes an occasional service against the evil eye,⁸ which can be read by a layperson, and has thus in practice removed the pastoral need for exorcistic prayers read by a priest. In 2006 the synod of the

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Church of Greece issued an encyclical which severely restricted the possibility of exorcisms performed by priests.⁹

In the Russian Orthodox context, it is only since the 1970s that extra-baptismal exorcisms have become popular.¹⁰ The 2022 draft document shows that the official policy of the Russian Orthodox Church is primarily to uphold the clerical monopoly on exorcism in the pastoral practice.

Consecration of water and the baptism of Christ

The extra-baptismal use of holy water (ἁγιασμός) is universal in contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy, and the consecration of holy water is an essential element in the celebration of Epiphany in the Byzantine rite.¹¹ Christmas and Epiphany are both related to the theme of παρουσία or *adventus* – the solemn and festive arrival of Christ and the manifestation of his sovereignty. In the Christian West this theme became linked with the incarnation while the Christian East associates this theme with the beginning of the public ministry of Christ at his baptism.¹² Epiphany is one of the oldest Christian feasts and in the Christian East primarily associated with the baptism of Christ.¹³ Although it is a theological cliché today that Easter is the primary feast of the liturgical year for the celebration of baptism, there also exists an ancient tradition of associating the celebration of baptism with

1 Cf. Heiser, *Taufe*, 98-103, 270-275, 292-297.

2 Cf. Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον, 13-33; Ἱερατικὸν, 265-278.

3 Cf. Groen, *Evil Eye*.

4 Cf. Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον, 312-329.

5 Cf. World Council of Churches, *Baptism*, 2-7.

6 Проект документа „Отношение Русской Православной Церкви к современным практикам экзорцизма“.

7 Cf. Paradedmetriu, *Exorcism*.

8 Ἀκολουθία ἐπὶ Βασκανίαν.

9 Ἱερατικὸν Συνόδου τῆς Εκκλησίας τῆς Ἑλλάδος, “Εὐχαὶ Ἐξορκισμῶν,” 691-694.

10 Cf. Nosachev, *Possession*, 66-78.

11 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 219-222.

12 Cf. Rosso, *celebrazione*, 789-808.

13 Cf. Getcha, *Typikon*, 126-129.



Epiphany, which in some regions also predates the 3rd-century preference for Easter as the baptismal feast.¹⁴

In the late 4th century, John Chrysostom bears witness to the practice that holy water was consecrated in memory of the baptism of Christ at the vigil of Epiphany and that the faithful took holy water back home and kept it throughout the year.¹⁵ A pilgrim travelogue from the late 6th century describes the celebration of Epiphany at the baptism site of the river Jordan.¹⁶ At dawn after the vigil, the priest consecrated the waters of the river Jordan. Thereafter, sailors from Alexandria filled vessels with water from the river to take back home and sprinkle on

their ships. Then the catechumens were baptized in the river. Finally, pilgrims dipped funeral shrouds into the consecrated river to be buried in.

Since the consecration of baptismal water has been documented since the 3rd century and Epiphany was originally the primary baptismal feast in the Christian East,¹⁷ it is reasonable to assume

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that the consecration of holy water at the vigil of Epiphany is a residue of Epiphany as a baptismal feast and that the holy water was originally intended

to be baptismal water. Some scholars argue that the main prayer for the consecration of holy water at Epiphany in the Byzantine rite is an adaptation of a prayer for the consecration of baptismal water.¹⁸ One can also note a structural similarity between the prayer for consecrating baptismal water and Eucharistic prayers.¹⁹

However, the consecration of holy water at Epiphany in Constantinople during the 6th century had become completely separated from the celebration of baptism. A first consecration took place inside Hagia Sophia (not in the baptistery) followed by a second smaller consecration of the holy water fount in the courtyard outside the church.²⁰ The status of Epiphany as a baptismal day was upheld in the so-called Typikon of Hagia Sophia,²¹ but the consecration of holy water at Epiphany had become completely detached from the celebration of baptism in Constantinople and elsewhere (although the modern liturgical abuse of using previously consecrated holy water for the celebration of baptism has unintentionally in some places restored the link between baptism and holy water).²²

Reflection on baptismal water

While holy water per se has not been the topic of much theological reflection, Schmemmann reflects as follows on baptismal water:

14 Cf. Johnson, *Rites*, 468.

15 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 215; Kallinkos, *Χριστιανικός*, 533-534; Trempelas, *Μικρόν Εύχολόγιον*, 15-16.

16 Trempelas, *Μικρόν Εύχολόγιον*, 14.

17 Cf. Johnson, *Rites*, 468.

18 Cf. Denysenko, *Blessing*, 83-101.

19 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 34.

20 Cf. Trempelas, *Μικρόν Εύχολόγιον*, 16.

21 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 23.

22 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 34.

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Water is undoubtedly one of the most ancient and universal of all religious symbols. From the Christian point of view three essential dimensions of this symbol are important. The first can be termed *cosmical*. There can be no life without water, and because of this the “primitive” man identifies water with the principle of life, sees in it the *prima essential* of the world: “... and the Spirit of God was moving on the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). But if water reflects and symbolizes the world as cosmos and life, it is also the symbol of destruction and death. It is the mysterious depth which kills and annihilates, the dark habitation of the demonic powers, the very image of the irrational, uncontrollable, elemental in the world. The principle of life, a life-giving power, and the principle of death, the power of destruction: such is the essentially ambiguous intuition of water in man’s religious worldview. And finally, water is the principle of purification, of cleanliness, and therefore of regeneration and renewal. It washes away stains, it re-creates the pristine purity of the earth. It is this fundamental religious symbolism of water—symbolism rooted in the self-evident and natural attributes of water—that permeates the Bible and the whole biblical story of creation, fall and salvation.²³

Schmemmann continues to reflect on the meaning of consecration:

Consecration, be it of water, or of the bread and wine in the Divine Liturgy [...], is never a visible and “physical” miracle, a change that can be tested and proved by our senses. One can even say that in “this world,” i.e. by its standards and “objective” laws, nothing “happens” to water, bread or wine, and no laboratory test could detect any change or mutation in them, so that even to expect such a change, to look for its, has always been considered as blasphemy and sin by the Church. Christ came not to *replace* “natural” matter with some “supernatural” and sacred matter, but to *restore* it and to fulfill it as the means of communication with God. The holy water in Baptism, and the bread and wine the Eucharist, stand for, i.e. represent the whole of creation, but creation as it will be at the *end*, when it will be consummated in God, when He will fill all things with himself. It is this *end* that is revealed, anticipated, made already *real* to us in the sacrament; and in this sense each sacrament makes us *pass over* into the Kingdom of God. It is because the Church herself is the sacrament of this *passage* and in each of her sacraments takes us *there*, into the Kingdom of God, that the water of Baptism is *holy*, i.e. the very presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit; that the bread and the wine of the Eucharist are *truly*, i.e. really, and with a reality more real than all the “objective” realities of “this world,” the Body and Blood of Christ, His *parousia*, His presence among us. Thus *consecration* is always the manifestation, the epiphany of that End, of the ultimate Reality for which the world was created, which was fulfilled by Christ through His Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, which

23 Schmemmann, *Water*, 39.

the Holy Spirit reveals today in the Church and which will be consummated in the Kingdom “to come.”

[...] The water is consecrated so as to *show* and to *be* remission of sins, redemption, salvation; to be that which all matter is meant to be: a means to an end, which is man’s deification—knowledge of God and communion with God.

Holy water as an eschatological symbol for the kingdom to come

Schmemmann’s reflection on the use and consecration of water in the celebration of baptism can be taken as typical example of influential trends in modern Orthodox sacramental theology, which tries to overcome the acontextual and fragmented approach of polemical theology and the magical approach of popular piety and folklore.²⁴ This vision of liturgical and sacramental theology attempts to make the doctrine of deification and the Eucharist the foundation of ecclesiology and the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. But as Schmemmann readily admitted himself, the actual life of the church is often dominated by a magical approach to sacraments and rites, which makes the church appear irrelevant to the modern world. Schmemmann’s own solution was not to reform the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church, but rather to renew the understanding of the liturgical life and what the church is.²⁵ This could also serve as a starting point for a pastoral reflection on the use of holy water as an eschatological symbol for the kingdom to come and the restoration of creation in Christ, but throughout history holy water has often been a replacement for “pagan” rites or the “unworthy” Christian’s substitute for the Eucharist.



The rites for the consecration of holy water

It is usually said that the Orthodox Churches have two rites for the consecration of holy water – the major consecration of holy water at Epiphany and the minor consecration of holy water throughout the year;²⁶ however, in some Orthodox Churches (e. g., the Church of Greece), there also exist additional short rites for the consecration of holy water for occasional benedictions.²⁷

In the current liturgical practice holy water is consecrated twice at Epiphany.

The 8th-century codex Barberini gr. 336, which is the oldest preserved Euchologion of the Byzantine rite, contains only the rite for consecrating holy water at Epiphany.²⁸ It is worth noting that this rite also contains the second prayer for consecrating the water of the fount in the courtyard after the consecration of holy water inside the church. This second prayer disappears from the rite during late Byzantine period and is no longer a part of the rite although it has been taken up again in the Greek liturgical books as the consecratory prayer the rites of

24 Cf. Ladouceur, *Theology*, 321-324.

25 Cf. Galadza, Schmemmann, 7-32.

26 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion*, 215-224.

27 Cf. Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον, 365-455.

28 Parenti/Velkovska, eds., *L'Eucologio Barberini*, 132-139.

consecrating holy water for occasional benedictions.²⁹ In the current liturgical practice holy water is consecrated twice at Epiphany, first on Epiphany Eve in the church and a second time after liturgy on the day of Epiphany, either outside of the church or at a natural body of water.³⁰

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The modern liturgical books also contain the rite for the minor consecration of holy water. This rite is not found in the oldest liturgical manuscripts which either do not contain any rite for the consecration of holy water apart from Epiphany or only some simple prayer.

It is only from the 13th century onwards that we find comprehensive rites for the minor consecration of holy water and the current rite dates from the 14th century.³¹ This rite is strongly Marian and the 13th-century theologian John the Sinner explained that the holy water is consecrated through the intercession of the Mother of God.³² No liturgical uniformity seems to have existed until the standardization of liturgical practice through the mass production of printed liturgical books from the 16th century onwards.³³

The first witness to the institutionalized use of holy water in the Byzantine rite apart from Epiphany is Patriarch Nikephoros in the 9th century, who writes that holy water is consecrated at the beginning of each month. In the 12th century the canonist Theodore Balsamon explains in his commentary on canon 65 of the Quinisext Council that



holy water is consecrated at the beginning of each month to replace a pagan custom of lightning bonfires at the beginning of each month for luck. The 11th-century penitential canons attributed to the 6th-century Patriarch John the Faster³⁴ state that penitents who are excluded from the Eucharist may drink holy water instead.³⁵ Consequently, the explicit justification for the use of holy water found in Byzantine canon law is to replace pagan customs and serve as a substitute for the Eucharist for penitents.

Trempelas explained the lack of a formal rite for the consecration of holy water apart from Epiphany with reference to the occasional mentions of holy water in early Christian literature where a saint, bishop, or priest consecrates water merely by making the sign of the cross and sometimes also saying a short prayer. He argued that the formal rite for the minor consecration of holy water developed in imitation of the consecration of holy water at Epiphany.³⁶ The earliest sources

29 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion* 365-455.

30 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion* 220.

31 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion* 218-219; Kallinkos, *ναός* 540-541; Trempelas, *Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον* 53-57.

32 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion* 223.

33 Cf. Velkova Velkovska, *Books* 232-233.

34 Getcha accepts the attribution to John the Faster, but the consensus in Byzantine legal historical scholarship is that they must date from the 11th century, see Troianos, *Quellen* 162-165.

35 Cf. Getcha, *Euchologion* 218-219; Kallinkos, *ναός* 540-541; Trempelas, *Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον* 53-57.

36 Trempelas, *Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον* 53-57.



indicate that holy water was used for drinking and purification, and that there was a strong belief in the healing properties of holy water. In 4th-century sources the consecration of holy water is sometimes also linked to the consecration of oil which shows an affinity with the anointing of the sick.³⁷ Early Christian and Byzantine popular piety associated holy water with faith healing.

Today the consecration of holy water has become a pastoral factotum, which is used to bless everything from schoolchildren to private enterprises. In theory it is the rite of the minor consecration of holy water, which should be used, but the minor consecration is ironically much longer than the major consecration. In printed liturgical books, the major consecration of holy water at Epiphany takes up approximately 14 pages while the minor consecration takes up approximately 21 pages.³⁸ For the occasional benediction with holy water an abbreviated rite is used which takes up approximately 7 pages in the liturgical books.³⁹ This abbreviated rite has radically reduced the hymnography, replaced the long consecratory prayer with the short courtyard prayer from the codex Barberini, and fitted the readings and prayers for the occasion.

Conclusion

In sum: The consecration of holy water continues to be an essential part of the celebration of Epiphany in the Eastern Orthodox Churches today. Furthermore, the consecration of holy water for occasional benedictions plays a prominent role in contemporary Eastern Orthodox popular piety. Finally, the ancient custom of drinking holy water continues to this day in the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

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37 Cf. Meyendorff, Anointing, 34-36.

38 Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον, 265-278; Ἱερατικὸν, 265-278.

39 The official liturgical books of the Church of Greece contain 10 different occasional benedictions with holy water see Μικρὸν Εὐχολόγιον, 365-447.

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