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Nature vs. Sacrum in the World's Religions

Nature has always played a considerable role in the development of the world's religions. Indeed, Nature was the temple for early humans. The geography of religion looks at the spatial distribution of cult centres in relation to elements of the natural environment. This involves both the geographical causes of any particular location and the natural conditions for its development. This type of research focuses either on individual landforms, such as mountain peaks, caves and rivers or larger geographical systems, such as mountain ranges, catchment areas or coastal stretches. In his *Fenomenologia religii* (Phenomenology of Religion), G. van der Leeuw lists, among the objects of religion (or subjects of faith), the "holy environment" (*Umwelt*), which includes holy rocks (or holy mountains) and holy trees, holy waters and holy flames, and the holy accompanying-world (*Mitwelt*), i.e. the animals.¹ He draws much attention to "the Mother figure", which he identifies with the Mother-Earth. Van der Leeuw notes that Mother-Earth is among the oldest Greek images of gods. To the Greeks, Earth was a woman with the upper half of her body extended above the ground. In the Greek mythology, the Mother-Earth was embodied mainly in the goddess Gaia, mother of Ponthos (the sea) and Uranos (the sky).

In the Hindu mythology, the Mother-Earth takes the form of the Mountain-Earth, the seat of the gods. The Earth itself is to represent the body of the pre-Arian God-Mother. In turn, the Hindu goddess Devi is closely connected with fertility and the Earth. The land of India embodies the body of Devi whose outline corresponds to the natural shape of the land. Although Devi is chiefly linked with the Earth, it is also frequently being identified with the great rivers of India, many of which are worshipped as deities in their own right. Earth gods have always been worshipped in India: Prythivi (= Earth, the base and feeder), Agni (God of fire; the sun in the sky, a lightning in the air and a sacrificial fire on the ground), Soma (representing a sacrificial drink = drink of life of the same name; it is a symbol of the merger of two opposing elements, fire and water), and Aranjani (a goddess of forests). The Earth is normally regarded as the oldest and most respected of god-figures.² The Brahma mythology depicts the universe as a great lotus flower with a thousand petals. The lotus filaments represent mountains full of metals and the petals symbolise continents. Beneath the

petals reside demons and snakes. In the middle of the pericap – the four oceans – spreads a continent that includes India.³ Father Edward Bulanda points out that the figure of the Mother-Earth could be regarded as a primitive form of the Mother God. The Earth as a feeding mother has been an object of adoration and respect and sometimes even a mystical pietism. She plays an important role in the beliefs of many other peoples to which she is a provider of food and hence, of life.

In western Africa, as shown by father Henryk Zimoń, there still are shrines devoted to Earth symbolising and embodying a local earth-spirit, protector of all family members. A number of sacred sites are normally located on a territory inhabited by one family, but the one devoted to earth is always the most important. As a rule it is the main centre of the cult of the earth and ancestors and a symbol of the family's unity and autonomy. Such earth shrines are located in various landforms, such as mountains or hills, water reservoirs, coppices, groups of rocks or trees, and they always feature a sacrificial altar.

Virikuta in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, is regarded by the Huicholi Indians as their original homeland, a holy site and birthplace of the Sun (*Tayaupa*), the Fire (*Tatevari*) and other divine forces of nature.

Riatea (*the "heavenly space"*), an island in the Polynesian Society Islands, is the mythical original land that emerged from the bottom of the ocean.

And finally, the *Old Testament* contains the basics of the Jewish and Christian faith. Here, God is depicted as the Creator of all life on Earth in the very first verses of the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." (Genesis 1. 1-1.5). This was the first day of the world's creation. On the following days, God created the firmament (day two), the Earth and the seas and the plants (day three), the stars (day four), living creatures such as fish and fowl (day five), cattle and man (day six). "And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden⁴; and there he put the man whom he had formed". (Genesis 2.8). According to theologians, the terms "Heaven" and "Earth" contained in the Holy Bible mean everything that exists, therefore all the creation. The "Earth" is the world of man, "Heaven" may mean the firmament, but also the place of God: "...Father which is in heaven." (Mathew 5.16). And so God alone created the visible world, or all that surrounds man. In other words, "there exists nothing that would not owe its existence to God the Creator" proclaims St. Augustine.

Religion involves the development of a "sacred space". According to the already quoted G. van der Leeuw, "a sacred space is a site which turns into a seat because of the repetitive operation of the force either by itself or through men. It is a place of cult, regardless of whether the seat has the form of a house or a temple. (...) forests and caves, rocks and mountains are typically defined as the sacred space".⁵ One of

the basic components of pilgrimage migrations is the *pilgrimage space*. It is normally defined by two points, the starting point and the destination. The latter is also the starting point of the return journey. In the Hindu tradition sacred places, particularly those linked with water, are known as *tirthas*. The term *tirtha* means typically a “crossing place”, a “sacred ford”, where anyone can cross the river (it also describes any place by the waterside, especially a bathing place). The symbolic meaning of *tirtha* is much broader and means a crossing from the earthly world to the sacred world of the heavens. The faithful claim divinity to be particularly strong at such sites. According to historians “in such sites, the cosmic time and the historical time intersect and the difference between the transcendent and the earthly become blurred allowing individuals to see the pure and blissful nature of divinity”. Each pilgrimage thus requires the covering of a certain *sacred space*.⁶ The destination, in both the religious and geographical sense, is a *sacred site* (*locus sacer*). It could be a single object or an entire town complete with its surroundings. In Islam, such sacred space is called *haram*, in Hinduism and Buddhism it is related to as *mandala* and in Christianity as *sacrum*. The broadest known *sacred space* surrounds Mecca (c. 770 km²). In northern pre-Islamic Arabic lands, sacred territories – or *himas* - were defined complete with vegetation, forests, pastures and animals all belonging to the god. *Hima* was but one type of protected sacred territories.

The Hindu mythology is full of the incredible cult to the sentinels of the. Most sources mention eight sentinels protecting the four main directions of the Earth and four taking care of the intermittent ones. Starting in the East and following the Sun, these are: Indra, Agni, Yama, Nirryti, Varuna, Vayu, Kubera and Ishana. The symbolism of the directions of the Earth has been used in the construction of temples, towns and houses. The Hindu mythology also mentions gods of the air. There is a vast pantheon of such gods including Indra (god of the healing storm and thunder), Rudra (god of the destructive storm), the Maruts (deities of storm and thunder clouds), Vayu (god of wind), Parjanya (god of Raincloud), Apah (god of the heavenly waters and rainwater).

Development of the religious function often leads to the development of a sacred landscape (*Sakrallandschaft*). It is a prime research area of the geography of religion and includes studies into the transformation of the natural into cultural landscape under the influence of the religious function and the mutual relationships between the *sacrum* and the surrounding space. To put it simply, a “sacred landscape” is made up of sacral objects built at a certain time and place. Such a landscape, one of many possible landscape types, is a tangible product of a culture that has developed with the involvement of religion. A sacred landscape contains a sacred space, or an area recognised as a seat of God or gods. Evidence of worship to untransformed landscapes can be traced back to the beliefs of the early humans. Numerous mythologies link the origin of particular landscape types (such as a desert landscape) with the operation of supernatural beings (like giants). There is a hierotopographic⁷ principle whereby every feature that stands out in a landscape is unusual. Everything out of the ordinary generates both respect and metaphysical anxiety. Large, lone

and hidden objects draw people's attention and tend to attract worship. The principle holds regardless of the religion. Landscapes within a known territory, but not normally accessible to simple mortals would be typically regarded as sacred. Often, this was a synonym for the seats of deities.

For an Australian Aborigine, a landscape feature carries in itself a sacred meaning. Drawing on the studies of Andrzej Szyjewski⁸, one can demonstrate that Australia's best known sacred landscape linked with totemic rituals is Ayers Rock (or "an old rock"), a holy rock of the Aborigine Loritja and Pitjanjara tribes. Ayers Rock is a dominant plateau made of a red Cambrian rock with steep cliffs, aloof in the middle of a flatland next to the Amadeus lake (Northern Territory). According to local beliefs, it is a focal point where the totemic predecessors used to gather to fight each other, to die and disappear.

In some religions close relationship between the natural environment and human beliefs can be observed to this day. India is the best example with its mythology strongly featured in the contemporary cult of holy rivers and peaks. The cult of the "holy sites", such as mountain peaks, rocks, rivers and their paths, water bodies, forests, etc., has always played a significant role in Hinduism. The decisive impact of natural features, particularly of water, on the location of religious cult centres is visible in India's pilgrimage regions. Out of nearly 150 major cult centres, some 60 per cent are related to water, mainly rivers (more than 50 per cent) and mountain peaks (15 per cent).

On the pantheon, gods representing the forces of nature and therefore, to an extent, the natural environment have always been prominently represented. The most popular of them are the gods of the Sun (e.g. Amaterasu of Japan, or Tsohanoai in North America) and the gods of nature (e.g. of vegetation, rain, volcanic fire, wind, rivers, forests and seas). Native Americans also worship gods personifying natural phenomena.

Water plays a particular role in the Hindu cosmology. All the creation is born out of the water, of its navel. Out of the water, of the Golden Bosom, were born the gods created by the original parents: Heaven and Earth. The worship of waters in all their forms including rivers, lakes, ponds, oceans and rain, is one of the ancient Hindu cults. To this day, the Hindu belief is that by immersing themselves in water, a form of the original matter, they wash off the dirt of the body and soul and are reborn. Containing an essence of life water brings fertility and leads to growth. An embryo of every being falling from the skies turns in the water into a subtle essence.⁹

According to many beliefs, drinking water that springs from the ground and continues as a waterfall comes from a supernatural underground world. To some, water wells and sources represent the Earth's spiritual bosom and as such have been bestowed with the power to heal, pass wisdom and make wishes come true. Divine powers were ascribed to water that bubbled on the way out of the ground as early as in the antiquity. Fortune telling sources gave birth to the most famous oracles, such

as the Apollo's in Delphi and Dido near Miletus. The sources whose water returns to disappear underground were regarded as routes down to the Hades.

In the often quoted example, the Zuni people from the south-western United States believe that sources are connected with distant oceans just as willow twigs are with the trunk. According to the Zuni mythology, the Dawn People, the original humans, came to the Earth through those waters springing from an underground world.

In almost all the world's religions waterwells have a power to make barren women fertile. Also cases of mineral sources worshipped as sacred have been known since the antiquity. There are several Egyptian accounts of such sources, often accompanied by temples. In Europe, the most frequently quoted example is that of the City of Bath in South-west England. The ancient Britons appreciated the healing properties of the local sources devoted to Sulis, the goddess of water and healing. The Romans identified Sulis with Minerva, the Greek goddess of healing. They built a temple with baths for pilgrims around the main source (Aque Sulis, or the Sulis Waters) around 70 AD. Visitors would pray to the goddess Sulis not just for the return of health and protection, but also for a penalty for villains. Bath was also a site of other cults, including Sulevias, the three Celtic Mother Earth gods.

The most famous water source of contemporary Christianity, was discovered on 25 February 1858 by Bernadette Soubirous, on the advice of a lady appearing in the Massabielle cave - the Virgin Mary. The cases of miraculous healing with this spring water have turned the little town of Lourdes into one of the world's most important and largest sites of a religious cult. Out of the six millions pilgrims who visit every year nearly 100 thousand suffer from illnesses. They make this trip principally in the belief in the healing powers of the miraculous water. In 1882, a special Medical Office was established to evaluate the healing cases. By 2000, it had collected reports of more than 600 healings, some 80 of which have been verified by the Church authorities as unquestionably miraculous containing evidence of divine intervention.

The holiest of all Muslim sources is located at Mecca. Tradition has it that the Archangel Gabriel indicated it to a maid of Hagar, Abraham's wife, and her son Ismail, dying of thirst in the desert. It was then to have been overtaken by the desert and rediscovered by Mohammed's grandfather Abd al-Muttaliba. Known as the Zamzam well, it is now covered by an adorned structure and a dome. The water is still used for the ritual cleansing of the body and is regarded as a panaceum. As part of a very popular custom, the faithful can dip in it the clothes they want to be buried in.

The river has served as a metaphor for human life since antiquity. It starts from the birth, conception or previous existence (at source) to death, the afterlife or reincarnation (at the river mouth). In Buddhist philosophy, to be enlightened one must negotiate a river against its current all the way to the source. Rivers have provided the main symbol of fertility and plenitude. They also marked the border between life and death with the most famous rivers of Hades: the Styx and the

Acheron. The Japanese followers of Buddhism and Shintoism believe that the river Sanzunokawa is the one that separates the living from the dead.

Rivers have also been regarded as sacred or even as the embodiment of deities. The Tigris and Euphrates were worshiped by the ancient Hetytes. The Joruba tribe in western Africa believes that the river Ogun is the transformed goddess Jemoja. With the earth often identified as a goddess, rivers are treated as her visible body. A river is the complex ancient cult symbol of India. In Hinduism, water passes as the source of divinity for its purifying feeding properties while rivers are regarded as sacred because they fall from the skies purifying and fertilising the soil. In the Hinduist mythology rivers count among the Earth gods, such as waters of the skies, sisters, Soma cows, mothers and mistresses of Agni, which run down to Earth and provide water to the sources of the earthly rivers.¹⁰ Hence, the far bank (*para*) of the river has come to symbolise the destination of the Hindu's pilgrimage. The most important pilgrimage site, the *tirtha* – the passing site, the holy ford – is linked with the seven holy rivers to which, according to the faithful Hinduists, was likened to the *Sansara*, or the “circle of existences” generally related to the idea of rebirth. The image of Buddhism-mahajana as the “great ferry” has led to the development of the symbol that then spread throughout India's religions. In Hinduism, Jainism, and in Buddhism, the suffering and rebirth (*sansara*) was identified with an ocean or a river separating humans from *nirvana* (enlightenment). To Buddhists, the Ganges became the symbol of *sansara* particularly during the floods. Indeed, believers of mahajana likened their doctrines to the ‘great ferry’ which was to carry humanity to the “far side”, to *nirvana*. In Hinajana Buddhism, however, only a small boat is available for this journey capable of taking only a relatively limited spiritual faithful elite to the “other side”.

The Vedic imagination created two great images on how the rivers are crossed. The first is linked with the concept of a three-tier universe, with the skies above, atmosphere in between and the earth below. Humans moved from the earth to the skies and the gods from the skies to the earth. The atmosphere (*antariksa*) is often referred to as the vast “river of space” and is crossed during the journeys between the skies and earth. The second image involved rivers which originated in the skies and flowed vertically down to the ground, from the heavenly “water distributing lake” through the atmosphere to the ground. According to myths in the Righveda, Indra killed a snake named Vritra, a demon that kept waters prisoner. Thus, Indra freed the heavenly waters making it possible for them to fall to the earth. According to the Righveda “Indra freed? released? for humanity the running waters, dismissed the snake and sent forth the Seven Rivers. Thus he opened windows which previously had been blocked.” This stream of live-giving waters spanning heaven and earth has come to signify a “crossing or fording”. Anyone could use the falling rivers to walk from the earth to the far bank of the heavens. The Ganges is sometimes referred to as the “flowing ladder to heavens” (*svarga-sopana-sarini*). To become earthly rivers, the falling heavenly waters are the? (seems incomplete here?) in the

Vedic imagination streams of *soma*, passing through the filter of heavens. The Ganges is for example regarded as a river of milk and immortality nectar (*amrita*). Freed from the heavens by Indra, the other holy rivers are likewise identified with the *soma*, the intoxicating potion of gods.

A small digression is needed here to explain the nature of the *soma*. *Soma*, a deity (from the verb *su* meaning to press-out or extrude) – is also the name of a plant and a hallucinogenic brew made out of it. The plant comes from “far away and high above”. An eagle takes it from the heavens and sets it on the remote Mountain of Mujavant. It is guarded by *Gandhars*, masculine demi-gods. The *Gandhars* are thought to be the distributors of *soma*. *Soma* therefore comes from the heavens and provides immortality on earth. *Amryta*, another drink, is the nectar of immortality of the gods.

The most important pilgrimage destination, *the tirtha* - the crossing place or the holy ford – is linked with the seven holy rivers, to which Hinduists liken *sansara* or the *circle of existences*. These are the Ganges, Indus (Sindhu), Yamuna, Narbada, Godavari, Kaveri and the invisible mythical river of Sarasvati. The sources and the mouths of these rivers are believed to be the holiest. It is believed for example, that the holy river of Narbada, originating at Amarakantak in the Vindhaya Mountains, begins in the body of Shiva. In the riverbed of the Narbada (also known as the Ganges of the West), there are the famous smooth pebbles called *bana lingas* used as symbols of Shiva in its temples across India. Hinduists attribute a particularly high rank to the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and the “invisible” Sarasvati running between them, at the town of Allahabad (Prajag). The meeting point of the three rivers (*triveni*) is believed to be the holiest Indian river mouth (“triple holy”). This is likely to be the source of a custom to use the name of *Prajag* for almost all mouths of holy rivers. Let us devote a few sentences to this invisible river of Sarasvati. Daughter or wife of Brahma, Sarsawati is the goddess of the sciences, literature and fine arts. In the Vedic mythology she personified the then holiest river, which had its source in the heavenly ocean and which run through three world's zones. It had a purifying power that provided immortality and wealth. The mythical river runs deep underground and joins the Ganges and Yamuna at Prajag. The largest of all rivers is the Ganges (*Ganga Mai* or *Ganga Mâtâ* – Mother Ganga), the provider of life. She is regarded as a deity providing grace and eternal salvation. It is believed that the Ganges has been identified with the goddess Ganga for as much as 2500 years. Beliefs and myths have led to the seven holy rivers of India sometimes being referred to as the “sevenfold Ganges”, the source and prototype of all holy waters. Having descended to earth, it was “broken up” into seven streams, three of which turned eastwards, three ran westwards and one southwards. Each of the rivers can be regarded as the local Ganges if the population believes so. Regardless of the myth they follow, the Hindu believe that Ganga descended to the earth to wipe out human sins and that her touch ensures salvation. The divine origin of the Ganges, as believed by the faithful, is attested to by the numerous names of the river retained in the Hindu tradition. These names include for instance *Alakanandi* (“flowing from the Shiva's curls”), *Bhadra-soma* (*blessed*

drink), *Deva-bhuti* (coming from heaven), *Hara-shekhara* (Shiva's mane), *Khapaga* (flowing from heaven), *Tripathaga* or *Trishrotah* (treble-flowing, passing through, i.e. through heavens, earth and hell).

According to the popular myth, Ganga used to be for a long time a heavenly river. It ran through Brahmaloka, the principal Hindu paradise, and circled three times around the Brahma's city atop Meru, a mountain located, according to the Hindu cosmography, in the very centre of the universe. As the Milky Way it circled the heavens. When Shiva at Mount Kaylasa ordered her to descend from heavens, Ganga, dissatisfied with the decision, attempted to fall to the earth with all its weight to destroy it. Shiva, however, intercepted the falling river with his very curly hair and took a while to gradually lower her to the ground. For centuries the Ganges was therefore believed to stream down from Mount Kaylas (6714 m) in the Tibetan Himalayas and the mountain itself, as the seat of Shiva, became a holy mountain. It was believed that on the way from Kaylasa the Ganges ran into the Tibetan lake of Manasarovar (4557 m) to be divided and sent towards the four quarters of the Earth as the Indus, Djamuna, Ganges and Brahmaputra. A journey to the sources of the Ganges was a journey to the seat of Shiva. According to another myth, the Ganges owes its creation to Vishnu. During its stay in heaven, the god sent huge streams of water onto Shiva's head making his hair spill to all corners of the world. In the Hindu mythology, Ganga is a daughter of Himavanta, the godly personification of the Himalayas, the spouse of Mena. The Hindu faithful also believe that the Ganges waters have always flowed and their source is thought to be the summit of the mythical Mountain of Meru – the seat of gods in the centre of the universe. The seat of gods is located at the very peak of the mountain made of gold and precious stones. Right in the middle, there is the city of Brahmána, encircled by the river Ganga. Towns of the gods-guardians of the directions of the world (*lokapala*) surround Brahmána.

In India, rivers play a paramount role in death rites. According to the faithful, rivers have the power to erase all sins and link the world of the gods and the world of humans. The holy water of the Ganges given to a dying person, just as the death and cremation on the river banks, “ensures freedom from the chain of birth and death”. Rivers are symbols of the human journey towards destiny.

The Siberian peoples of Keta and Nagasana regard the holy river of Yenisei as the cosmic axis leading from the heavens to the underground land of the goddess Hoshadam. The goddess was exiled to the Lower World as the punishment for her treacherous liaisons with the Moon. The course of the river comes to symbolise the path Hoshadam followed after she had been exiled by the hero Alba to the northern island of the dead. Rainbow and the Milky Way are the heavenly symbols of the Yenisei River.

The Book of Genesis speaks of rivers taking their origin in the Eden. “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good: there is

bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates” (*Genesis 2, 10-14*).

[Only the latter two rivers have been identified, these are the Tigris and the Euphrates. This would indicate that the paradise should be located in Mesopotamia. According to some theologians, these rivers only serve as symbols of the incredible fertility of Eden]. The river Jordan, mentioned in various contexts on the pages of the *Old* and the *New Testament* is strongly tied with the sources of Judaism and Christianity.

Oceans play a major role in almost all religions of the inhabitants of coastal regions. They are seen as a source of abundance but also of many threats. In Norman mythology, oceans were the blood of a huge, primeval being – Imir. Ancient legends mention gigantic sea goddesses named Hafgygr and Margygr who broke ships apart. Greek mythology is also rich in sea gods.

Lakes are most frequently treated in myths as occult media associated with female charm as well as with death, the abyss and the place where the sun wanders at night. A lotus flower dropped by the god Brahma gave rise to the Pushkar (“Filled to the Brim”) Lake. Bathing in this lake at full moon in the Karttika month (October, November) is supposed to cleanse one of all sins.

Mountains, whose phenomenon has obsessed humanity since time immemorial, play a similarly important role in the history of beliefs and religion. They have always been a privileged place where man met God and witnessed his infinite immensity. “Human life is transient and changing, whereas mountains exist in a reliable and permanent way as an expressive image of the unchanging greatness of God...” (from Pope John Paul II speech given on 7 September 1986 on Mount Chetif in the Alps). The primitive man already observed that rain-bringing clouds formed first around mountain peaks, where thunder and lighting also appeared. Consequently, he worshipped mountains as gods or the home of gods.

As parts of consecrated nature, mountains were a sacred area for many societies. What deviates from the norm arouses respect and metaphysical fear. This rule holds regardless of the religion or creed.

There are uncounted symbolic and religious values attached to mountains. In the Babylon or Greek religions, the mountain was a symbol of power, greatness, indifference and eternal permanence. It was generally believed that mountains were the home of deities, demons, and spirits of the dead (among Celtic, Slavic and Germanic tribes). All heavenly gods had places reserved for their worship on hills. A mountain is the place closest to heaven which makes it doubly sacred: on the one hand, it participates in the spatial symbolism of transcendence, and on the other is an area reserved for atmospheric hierophanty. Mountains of volcanic origin are particularly privileged in the religious conscience. They not only tower over valleys, but also appear as high and inaccessible, like Sobótka – a cult place since time immemorial for peoples inhabiting Silesia.

The mountain is often considered to be the place where heaven meets the Earth, i.e. as a centre through which the axis of the world runs, an area immersed in *sacrum* where the transition from one cosmic being into another is possible. Thus the mountain is in the centre of the world and main directions are measured from it. In Hindu mythology such a mountain is Meru, the mythical, sacred mountain of Brahminism, Buddhism and Jinnism, located in the very centre of the world. It is made entirely of gold and precious stones, and has the house of the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva at its summit. The Polar Star is in the zenith over Mount Meru, with the Sun, Moon and other planets orbiting around it.

According to Mesopotamian beliefs, the “mountain of the countries” connects heaven with the Earth. The Ural and Altai people also have a central mountain, called Summur, Sumir or Sumer, the summit of which holds the Polar Star. Similar beliefs are found among the Japanese, Finns and Iranians.

As “the Mountain” is a juncture of heaven and earth, it is obviously the highest point of the world. Consequently, consecrated areas or sacred places – temples and sacred cities are made to resemble mountains and thus also become “the centre”, i.e. they magically become an integral part of the cosmic mountain summit. Names of temples, sacred towers and cities bear witness to this identification with the mountain.

For example Babylon means “the house of the shining mountain”, “the house on which heaven and earth rest”, or “the concord between the heaven and earth”. The Babylonian temple, the ziggurat, was actually a cosmic mountain, i.e. a symbolic image of the cosmos. The seven levels corresponded to seven planetary heavens and the highest terrace housed the sacrificial altar.

In the *Old Testament*, the mountain, apart from the earth, sea and the primeval ocean, was one of the primeval elements of creation, a sacred sphere reserved for God. The mountains, just as the whole Earth, are works of God.

“Before the mountains were born

Before the Earth with its circle was made

From the dawn of time and for ever, You exist, God”

According to the Canaan tradition, the Israelis placed the sacred sphere reserved for God on mountains and summits. The mountain called Horeb (= “dry”, “lonely”), which is the second name of the biblical Mount Sinai, is where the Commandments were received and a covenant made between God and His people. The Lord who spoke from a burning bush gave Moses the mission of leading Israel. It was also here that God showed Himself to Elijah. In the age of David, God indicated Mount Zion as the place of His special worship. Salomon erected a temple there. Zion is the original name of the castle in Jerusalem. Once the Ark of the Covenant was moved there, Zion was worshipped as a sacred mountain – the house of God. In time, this name was extended to cover the entire mountain and even the City of Jerusalem (“Zion’s Daughter”). The Psalms include a beautiful song praising the beauty of Zion.

“... the mountain of his (God's) holiness.

Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.”

In the *New Testament*, the mountain is a specific or unspecified summit, usually a geographic term, which also has a theological and symbolic meaning. The mountain is usually the location of Jesus' prayer, His shelter or place of His great deeds. Jesus climbed a mountain to give His first sermon. It was also on a mountain that He chose His 12 apostles. After the first multiplication of bread, Jesus “went up into a mountain apart to pray” (Matthew 14,23). On the Mount of Olives he began His tribulations, on the Golgotha He made his redeeming sacrifice. The history of religion records many sacred mountains. Sometimes the same mountain is the place of cult in many religions. The Mount of Adam in Sri Lanka may serve as an example here, as it is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and eastern Christians. At its summit, there is a depression in the shape of a huge human foot (ca. 1.5 m long). According to the Buddhists this is a footprint of Buddha, whilst Hindus believe that here the God Shiva bounced off the earth when he ascended to heaven, whereas the Muslims are of the opinion that after expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam did penance here by standing on one foot for a thousand years. According to Christians, this is a footprint of Saint Thomas, the Apostle of India. Mount Sinai is the sacred mountain for Jews, Christians and Muslims. According to the Bible, the people of Israel, taken out of Egyptian slavery by Moses, went on a long and exhausting journey to the Promised Land. On the Sinai, Moses was graced by seeing Jahve and receiving the Ten Commandments from Him. The Book of Exodus says:

“And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.” (Exodus, 18,18) “And the LORD came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up.” (Exodus 19,20). At the same time, God proclaims Sinai sacred, meaning that Israelis cannot climb it with impunity: “And Moses said unto the LORD, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.” (Exodus 19,23). It has been impossible to locate this sacred mountain unambiguously. The tradition identifies it with the Djebel Masa peak (2285 m a.s.l., the Mount of Moses), located in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. This is a huge, granite peak, cut off from its surroundings by numerous valleys. At the foot of the mountain, where the “burning bush” appeared according to the tradition, there is an Orthodox St. Catherine Monastery. Pilgrims climb to the very peak of the mountain, to the Moses chapel, following a special path hewn by monks in rock and called “the path of our Lord Moses”.

The *Old Testament* also mentions the Ebal and Garizim mountains of central Palestine, where upon the orders of Moses, the Israelis renewed their covenant with God and blessed those who observed God's Law. The Book of Joshua says: “Then Joshua built an altar unto the LORD God of Israel in mount Ebal, As Moses

the servant of the LORD commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of whole stones, over which no man hath lift up any iron: and they offered thereon burnt offerings unto the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings. And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel. And all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges, stood on this side the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, as well the stranger, as he that was born among them; half of them over against mount Gerizim, and half of them over against mount Ebal; as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel.” (Joshua 8,30-33).

In the Blessing of Moses there is a mountain identified by specialists as being Mount Carmel “They shall call the people unto the mountain; there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness” (Deuteronomy 33,19).

Sacred mountains are particularly notable in oriental religions. The strongly developed cult of heaven and the related cult of mountains are the reason for the great number of sacred mountains in China, where apart from Kaylasa there are four sacred Buddhist mountains and five sacred Taoist mountains. Each of the five Taoist mountains is associated with part of the world (the fifth part is the centre). The mountains are as follows:

Hengashan: warden of water animals

Taishan: watches over the fate of people, and gives good luck

Sungshan: warden of earth and plants

Huashan: warden of metals

Hengshan: warden of land animals

The greatest reverence is paid to Taishan (The Distinguished Mountain). At its foot there is a temple of the Summit consecrated to the deity of the mountain. A ceremonial way leads to the summit. It consists of 6,000 steps and is called the Heavenly Ladder. Along the way, there are numerous monasteries and temples. Taishan is the place of the traditional, ritual *feng* sacrifice made by Chinese emperors. If the ritual progressed in an inauspicious way, it could even mean that the emperor would lose the power to rule, and was an omen of failure and the demise of his house.

Mount Kajlasa (6,714 m a.s.l.) is the sacred mountain of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. It is also revered by the followers of an ancient Tibetan religion called Bon Po. The holy aura that surrounds the mountain is a result of its shape. The clearly developed walls look like the planes of a diamond crystal and face the four directions of the world. On the southern slope there are visible cracks that resemble a swastika (an ancient Indian symbol of might). The pilgrimage is not made to the summit of the mountain, but around it. The pilgrimage is called *parikrama*, covers the distance of approximately 50 km and lasts from 1 to 4 days. The most devout believers walk this

route bowing to touch their forehead to the ground, so the pilgrimage can take them more than a month.

Two mountains are particularly revered in Japan: Mount Fuji (3,776 m a.s.l.) and Mount Ontakesan. According to the Japanese tradition, Fuji rose one night in 286 BC, when the earth parted to create the Biwa lake, and from this fissure the mountain arose. Until the II World War, a pilgrimage to Fuji was obligatory for every Shintoist.

In many myths, religions and belief systems, supernatural and god-like features are ascribed to stones and rocks. They seem to have an eternal and indestructible nature. A large part of their symbolism stems from the fact that they store heat, cold, water and, like diamonds, even light. For the cult of the rock, its consistency is also important. Particularly in eastern religions, temples were often hewn in rock, thus proving that rock was treated as a kind of *sacrum* by many peoples. Historians agree that the sanctity of rocks is proven not only by ancient megaliths, but also by the popularity of stone cult objects, like amulets or sacrificial knives. Rocks and stones were supposed to be inhabited by certain supernatural beings. Thus, the Tungus people of northern Russia believe that a dangerous forest spirit called the Forest Master may take up stone forms. Therefore they try to avoid stones resembling humans in shape, in order not to meet this spirit. Quite often stones themselves (of various sizes, though primarily large ones) are deemed holy or imbued with magical powers. Usually prayers are said or sacrifices made on rock outcrops, often strangely shaped ones, which are associated with spiritual powers. Some stones or rocks acquire the value of a symbol of a given community. For example, the holiest stone of ancient Greece was situated in the oracle chamber of the Apollo temple in Delphi. It was egg-shaped and was said to have been placed there by Zeus himself. The Greeks considered this stone to be the centre of the world and called it *omfalos* (the navel). They symbolically associated this stone with the body of the goddess Gaia, who was the Earth herself. Another such *omfalos* stone was found on Crete, in a place considered sacred because the umbilical cord of Zeus had supposedly fallen there after his birth. Scottish kings were crowned in Scone in Fife on the "Stone of Destiny", identified with the stone on which the patriarch Jacob laid his head when pondering the fate of the Israelis. The African Numana tribe living near the Niger River reveres small pebbles, which, according to the local belief, are parts of the god of heavens that have fallen to earth. Many rocks have characteristic indentations, which in many religions are treated as the footprints of deities or prophets (e.g. of Buddha, Shiva, Vishnu or Adam). Such forms have a similar cult importance in Christianity (e.g. the footprints of the Holy Mary in Poczajów or Bardo Śląskie).

Caves play an important role in the beliefs of many peoples, particularly those beliefs related to creation and death. In many mythologies the appearance of humanity is associated with caves or other openings in the ground. Caves also lead to the world of the dead. In Latin American beliefs, the Sun and the Moon were said to have been created in a cave. The first people were also believed to have come out of the ground in a place called Chicomoztoc ("the place of seven caves"). In many

regions of the world, caves served as natural sanctuaries for the gods and spirits of the earth. Historians note that the importance of caves in the Aztec religion is proven by the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacana, the famous “City of Gods”, being built on holy ground above a cave which served as an ancient sanctuary. The religious significance of caves and caverns is probably the reason why some religions often located their temples in them. Examples include the Ajanta Caves in India, a place of the Buddhist cult, composed of some 29 caves hewn in the steep slopes of a deep rock ravine and dating back to the 2nd century BC – 5th century AD, or the Ellora Caves (34 Buddhist and Hindu caves dating from 600 – 800 AD). Another famous cave is the Amarnath Cave in the Himalayas (Kashmir, India), a natural Hindu temple with an ice *linga* of Shiva.

The Bible contains many mentions of the desert. According to research by Father Stanisław Hałas, the term desert appears more than 400 times in the Holy Book.¹¹ The author purports that the desert became an important place for manifesting transcendental values, and thus a means for conveying religious messages. Theologians recognise the importance of the desert experience in the proper understanding of certain aspects of the Bible message. A term “biblical theology of the desert” has even been coined.¹² Father S. Hałas analyses the biblical desert as:

- a place and image of God’s punishment; a place of escape and for meeting God;
- a place of trial;
- a particular place of God’s care;
- a sign of God’s blessing (turning a desert into fertile land).¹³

In the beliefs of some peoples, great spiritual importance was ascribed to the soil, which contains nutrients necessary for the existence of living organisms. According to Mircea Eliade, the soil had a religious value even before myths concerning the earth appeared. There is a popular Native American legend about the origin of the Earth, which lays emphasis on the vitality of the soil. It says that mud brought up from the bottom of the primeval sea by otters, ducks and other water creatures was magically turned into the first dry land. The sanctity of soil is underlined by myths on the creation of man. Ancient Greeks believed that their forefather, Cercrops, was a man-snake made of earth. The Aché people of Paraguay still place a new-born baby in the ground to symbolise the link between the child and the sacred earth.

Groves or forests are considered to be the oldest sanctuaries in human history. Trees are a symbol of the link with the cosmos. This is because they are firmly rooted in the ground but raise their branches to heaven. Birds flocking onto the upper branches were often identified with souls or heavenly messages, and the fruit with heavenly bodies. Sometimes a tree is believed to be the route taken by the first humans, who climbed its trunk and branches to reach the Earth. In ancient Greece, many deities were believed to reside in holy groves. When a wood was felled, one tree or a stand of trees was left standing, usually that consecrated to Artemis. Oaks were associated with Zeus, olive trees with Athena, laurels with Apollo, plane-trees

with Dionysus, and myrtle-trees with Aphrodite. In the biblical Eden "... out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden (of Eden), and the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2,9). The tree of life is a symbol of the supernatural gift of immortality enjoyed by man before his fall. The tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolises the judgement of what is morally good and what is evil. It was the fruit of this tree that God forbade Adam to eat (Genesis 2,16). In Indian mythology, the first embryo of life created by waters grew into a cosmic tree, whose trunk is the axis of the universe and a pillar supporting the heaven. Gods sit on it as branches around the trunk. The same myths also mention two trees. They are: a female tree, growing from waters and earth, and *Ashwattha (pipal)*, a male tree of the sky with five branches pointing to the directions of the world. Its roots are at the top, on the summit of the earthly tree, and therefore in heaven, while its branches point downwards. Some gods, particularly Agni (the god of fire), Indra (the god of the healing storm), Rudra (the god of the destructive storm) and Varuna (the god of heaven and guardian of the cosmic order) are presented as cosmic trees or tree-trunks. Hindus believe that the earthly tree is the source of life and growth. Its roots grow from the centre of the motherly waters, its trunk form the axis of the world, its branches touch heavenly space, and its sap contains the essence of life. Early Germans had holy oak groves. They laid their sacrifices at the foot of the tallest tree in each such grove. As trees grow for a time longer than the lifetime of men, they symbolise time, adulthood and permanence in many religions. The annual vegetation cycle of deciduous trees made them symbols of fertility in some mythologies. One of the most famous trees is the gigantic ash-tree from Scandinavian mythology, called *Igdrasil*, which unifies the cosmos, as it takes water from springs and wells and delivers it to scores of supernatural beings inhabiting its branches. The highest branch is occupied by an eagle who guards the world for Odin, the leading god. In many beliefs, a tree is also considered to be the source of life. For example, the Herero people of South Africa believe that the first people and their cattle came down from a tree (called *omum-borombonga*) which grows on the grasslands south of the Cunene River. This tree is still alive and the locals lay special sacrifices of green boughs at its foot. The cult of trees, or even just their boughs, was also very well developed in the ancient religion of Crete.

A particularly well-known tree for Buddhists is a Bengal fig-tree (*Ficus religiosa*), traditionally referred to as the "Tree of Wisdom". Buddha sat under this tree contemplating for five years, and achieved enlightenment. The tree used to grow in the Indian town of Bodhgaya, but has since died. The present holy tree was brought from Anuradhapurna in Sri Lanka. Buddhists from all over the world come here to contemplate in front of the descendant of the famous BO tree. They believe this tree to be the oldest historic tree in the world. However, it is worth noting that figtrees have enjoyed special reverence in India for a long time as symbols of the bounty of nature and the residence of Shalabhandjicki, the goddess of trees. Beads made from fig trees are worn both in reverence of the Mother Goddess and Shiva.

In many religions, animals are accorded god-like reverence. In the present day, the cult of animals is particularly alive in India, where rhinoceroses, tigers, elephants, cows, bulls and snakes were revered as early as in the 3rd millennium BC. In the (widely understood) Indian religious culture, cows, bulls and snakes have a great symbolic meaning. The most spectacular is the cult of holy cows. The cow has always been the symbol of fertility and abundance. It has been compared to Mother Earth since time immemorial, as both are the providers of food and fuel and symbols of fertility. The cow is deemed to be the incarnation of the Great Goddess, who “has begot and supports life springing from her infinite womb”. The researchers of Indian culture note that the cow has recently become a symbol of “Mother India” as the “mythical embodiment of the present Indian state”.¹⁴

The reverence accorded by Hindus to the bull stems from its association with Shiva: Shiva’s mount was a bull named Nandin, on whom Shiva rode into battles against demons. The cult of the snake (*naga*) dates back to pre-Vegan times (before 1,500 BC) and still remains widespread, particularly in rural areas of southern India. It is connected with the cult of trees, water, earth and the Great Goddess. This is because snakes represent the forces of the earth, particularly the moist soil, which gives an abundance of gifts. In other words, snakes are the givers of riches, cattle and offspring, health, longevity and happiness.

Animals are also some of the incarnations (avatars) of one of the main Hindu deities – Vishnu. Of his 10 subsequent incarnations, the first three represent the fauna. The Fish (*Matsuya*) rescued humans during the great flood, the Turtle (*Kurma*) bears the Mandara mountain, which gods and demons use to churn the milky ocean in order to obtain the drink (*amrita*) that gives them immortality, and the Wild Boar (*Varaha*) pulls the Earth back from the precipice into which it had been pushed by a demon.

Certain pilgrimages and centres of cult have always caused environmental problems, which have become particularly acute in the last century. They mainly stem from the pollution of holy waters, the damaging impact of polluted air on the historic buildings of religious centres, as well as the danger of epidemics caused by periodic concentrations of hundreds of thousands of people.

This last threat has for a long time been posed by the hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrims often transmitted various infectious diseases. Between 1831 and 1912, there were 27 cholera epidemics recorded in connection with the hajj, of which the 1865-66 and 1893 epidemics had a global reach. The last cholera epidemic was recorded in 1926. In order to prevent epidemics, the first quarantine station for pilgrims was founded in Sinai in 1866. In the present days, mobile hospital units financed by particular Muslim countries operate along the main hajj routes. Within the Jeddah – Mecca – Medina triangle there are over a dozen hospitals and a modern quarantine station. The Saudi government has also build modern abattoirs and cold storage facilities, dramatically improving the sanitary conditions of ritual animal slaughter in the Mina Valley during the hajj.

The pollution of the waters of the Ganges is also becoming more and more serious, notwithstanding their undoubted anti-bacterial properties. These anti-bacterial properties were probably the reason why the Ganges had never been the source of serious epidemics outside of its course. However, the problem intensified as cities and industry developed. At present, the sewage from over 100 cities and 130 large industrial plants is dumped into the river, and corpses are often thrown into it. It is estimated that some 33,000 human corpses flow past Varanasi every year. All this can endanger the life and health of pilgrims, who, apart from the ritual bath in the river, also drink its water. In 1979, some 30 people died in Varanasi of cholera over just 2 days. This made the Indian authorities develop a plan for protecting the Ganges from pollution and grant 430 million rupees to the City for this purpose.

The above considerations are only an indication of some aspects linking religions with the natural environment. A study this brief cannot exhaust this fascinating subject. Our intention was mainly to draw the readers' attention to the role played by the natural environment in the development of the human spiritual culture at every stage of human development. We are not always fully aware of the impact of the natural environment on the development of religions and belief systems.

Notes:

¹ G. van der Leeuw, 1997, *Fenomenologia religii*. Wyd. 2 popr., Warszawa, pp. 45-74.

² G. van der Leeuw, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

³ M. Jakimowicz-Shah, A. Jakimowicz, 1986, *Mitologia indyjska*, Warszawa, p.167.

⁴ Eden – geographic name of the paradise corresponds to the Mesopotamian name of edin: edin = flatland, steppe.

⁵ G. van der Leeuw, op. cit., p. 348.

⁶ A. Jackowski, I. Sołjan, E. Bilaska-Wodecka, 1999, *Religie świata. Szlaki pielgrzymkowe*. Poznań, Wielka Encyklopedia Geografii Świata vol. XV, p. 17.

⁷ Hierotopography – a study of distribution and description of sacred sites.

⁸ A. Szyjewski, 1998, *Religie Australii*, Kraków.

⁹ M. Jakimowicz-Shah, A. Jakimowicz, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁰ M. Jakimowicz-Shah, A. Jakimowicz, op. cit., p. 53.

¹¹ S. Hałas SCJ, 1999, *Pustynia miejscem próby i spotkania z Bogiem. Wybrane zagadnienia biblijnej teologii pustyni*, Kraków, p. 9.

¹² S. Hałas SCJ, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³ S. Hałas SCJ, op. cit., pp. 43-332.

¹⁴ R. Waterstone, 1996, *Indie. Magia. Tradycja. Rzeczywistość*, Warszawa, p. 69.

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