

Baptism, Niqab, Vipers, and Doves

Luke 3:11-14

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The following are religious rituals or social rites of passage. They have actually been practiced or are currently practiced, many in the name of God.

The Grishneshwar Temple in India is the site of a very unusual – and potentially dangerous – religious ritual. I saw a picture of this Temple and reminded me of the Temple in the Indiana Jones movie. Babies between the ages of one and two are thrown from a 50-foot tower, with men positioned beneath to catch the babies on sheets. The 700 year old ceremony is believed to make children more intelligent, luckier and healthier and is practiced by both Muslims and Hindus in the region until today, luckier is all I'd say.

Kaparot is a traditional Jewish religious ritual that takes place around the time of the High Holidays and continues to be practiced today. Classically, it is performed by grasping a live chicken by the shoulder blades and moving around one's head three times, symbolically transferring one's sins to the chicken. The chicken is then slaughtered and donated to the poor, preferably eaten at the pre-Yom Kippur feast. The ritual is preceded by the reading of Psalms 107:17-20 and Job 33:23-24.

Mormons practice a baptism for the dead, vicarious baptism or proxy baptism is a religious practice of baptizing a living person on behalf of an individual who is dead; the living person is acting as the deceased person's proxy. It has been practiced since 1840 in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints where it is also called temple baptism because it is performed only in dedicated temples.

A [knee-cob] niqab is a veil which covers the face, worn by some Muslim women as a part of sartorial hijab. It is popular in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf but it can also be found in North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

The niqab is regarded differently by the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Some see it as obligatory, or fard, while others see it as recommended, or mustahab, and a few see it as forbidden.

Digambar [die-gama] is one of the two main sects of Jainism. Jainism is practiced in India but also has followers in the United States and Japan. Senior Digambar monks wear no clothes, following the practice of Lord Mahavira. They do not consider themselves to be nude — they are wearing the environment.

Digambaras believe that this practice represents a refusal to give in to the body's demands for comfort and private property . Digambara ascetics have only two possessions: a peacock feather broom and a water gourd.

I know—it's weird stuff isn't. All we do is share a cup and bread and consider it to represent the body and blood of Jesus and go under water for a brief period of time. Of course, we do believe a man was raised from the dead after three days.

It's only weird because it's not our ritual. As one mother once said, "What we do in our house is the way it is to be done, what they do is just crazy."

Traditions and rituals sometimes have very reasonable origins. For instance the niqab is practiced among Muslim women, you will remember it is a face covering or a veil, where only your eyes are seen. This practice flourishes in the Middle East and North Africa, but less so in southeast Asia. In a climate where there is substantial wind and sand like the Middle East and North Africa a niqab is like an umbrella in Seattle. In the more humid southeast Asia the ritual is more of a suggestion than requirement.

While some are pragmatic others appear to be sacred---filled with meaning but there is no simple explanation as to why. I imagine this is what the Jew who is killing the chicken is thinking and the Mormon being baptized for another. Which brings me to our practice of Christian baptism. Flannery O'Connor the soulful southern writer said of baptism "it is a violent death by drowning."¹

Well that's close.

John the Baptist did not invent baptism. John's father Zechariah was a priest so young John was familiar with a ritual cleansing. As pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem for the Holy days they arrived dirty. Not simply dirty from the dust and dirt roads but from the inevitable mixing with the Gentiles. So before you were allowed to enter the Temple area you needed a cleansing. Around the Temple were these affiliated baths and going in here was like well going into any exclusive place. A fancy restaurant, a country club, the VIP area at the airport, to enter was

¹ Walker Percy, "Notes for a novel about the end of the world," in *The Message in the Bottle*, p.118.

to say loudly you were not one of “them.” If we must wash “them” off then they must be disgusting and unacceptable. To go to the bath and be cleaned and then go to the Temple was a way of separating the “us” from the “them.”

Surprising his father and many others John does not enter the priesthood. Instead he moves to a small community outside of Jerusalem, in the hills, usually identified at Qumram. In this community those Jews in Jerusalem were sale outs. The priest made compromises with the Roman occupiers, their baptism was ineffective because the priest were dirty on the inside (or so the Qumram community believed). If you thought the priest were hypoallergenic about cleanliness, the Qumram community was hypoallergenic squared. They didn't believe the priest were any cleaner than the travelers or even the Gentiles. So John's community believed God was hostile against all forms of uncleanness. To be cleaned would take more than a ritual bath.

Christian history is riddled with reform movements. We have a tendency to think of other believers as, “they are good people but they did not go far enough.” In the middle ages the Catholics were clean but the Protestants did not think they were clean enough so they broke away. Earlier in the 20th century mainline churches like Methodist and such were doing a fine job but some thought they were more corrupt that they should be so fundamentalism is born. We can never be too clean or at least that's what you would think we believe.

So John's baptism is not like his fathers. A ritual cleansing to wash off the Gentile instead John's is a baptism for repentance. Which is a re-thinking of everything.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."²

Well that's a fine "How do you do." John missed Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People" class. The slang "brood of vipers" is such a contrast to the dove which will land on Jesus shoulder. John is making it clear no matter which kingdom you come from, Gentile or Jew, if it is from this violent world you are a viper. When you rise from the water it is a dove of peace that awaits you. Baptismal repentance is defecting from the violence and embracing the peace. In Luke's version, he directs these words to more than Pharisees but to the crowd which had gathered the Jordan. In both version, the evidence of repentance is on the other side of the water. It's not about believing this or that it's about reforming and changing the way we speak to people. Will we treat the "others" with kindness and justice instead of aggression?

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not

² Matthew 3:7-10

extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”³

The question was what shall we do? John wasn't trying to make anyone clean from touching the gentiles, he wasn't saying you are one of "us." Now in most of our sanitized Christians churches we make baptism akin to the Jewish ritual. We are washing off the world, because we are no longer part of the world. When you rise up you are one of us. When you emerge from the water you are clean and have been initiated. But that is so foreign to John that even I'm embarrassed.

Listen to John, he calls us to the water as Vipers and we leave the water as doves. Our baptism is not re-arranging the furniture or turning over a new leaf----we are dying, yes dying. We are not joining the club, we are getting an assignment. We rise and are sent. Baptism is a commissioning service.

If we were to reconsider baptism in this way, what kind of questions would we ask. I say something like, "Do you confess Jesus as your Lord?" or "Are you ready to follow Jesus?" Of course I am often dealing with children so the questions need to be applicable to their lives. But if we were going to create an honest to God catechism---about changing from what we are to what we need to be, one where the emphasis is on actions what would we say?

"Do you have two tunics, or more than you need or anything, then find a way to give it to someone who needs it?"

Don't use your leverage by class or money to take advantage of others, stop it.

³ Luke 3:11-14

No longer use aggression as a tool to provide order, instead use justice, which is what love looks like in public.

“Do you repent of your prejudices?”

“Yes”

“Then make friends from whom you are prejudice.”

“Do you repent of oppressing people”

“Yes”

“Then give half of what you have to those you have oppressed.”

How would history be different if we had treated baptism this way? To be Christian is to live in this way of love and justice and to reject the ways of the viper and the predator. Instead we have allowed baptism to fall into the category of “odd religious ritual” like tossing babies from a Temple roof or walking around nude. Baptism is not an oddity, it’s not even a ritual. Baptism is our radical way of saying, “yes, by birth we are selfish, we are violent, we are prejudice, we are vipers, but today we are born anew, we repent of our violent nature, prejudice, and self-centeredness. We now share our coats, groceries, we no longer take advantage of people, we don’t lie or threaten, and we are satisfied with what we earn.

It’s a story that I have lost all of the colorful details and only remember the essential details and words. I no longer remember who said it accept that he was an African American preacher. I don’t remember where he said it accept that it was an institution of higher learning. I don’t remember when he said it, although

by the context clues I think it was the 60's. This man was invited to speak because he had built his reputation by standing up for civil rights. So the progressive college had opened its door to the African American preacher because they were unafraid of his social gospel. They expected the usual rhetoric for the day. He rose to his feet and walked to the pulpit and this is the part I remember well.

“In these times, these horrific times, when kids are getting beat for sitting at lunch counters and Jim Crows got his foot on our neck, and good people stay quiet thinking this will go away on its own volition. In times like this I hear people say, surely this hatred will run out of steam. So they the good folks remain silent, but by being silent they allow the racist to be heard. But I say in times like this, it's not about what you think it is about. **It's about baptism**, you either got that Jesus love or you don't. You've either died to self and sin, and racism and silence are sins, or you are a product of American culture and history and your religion is nothing more than a Sunday hobby.

You is either a new creation in Christ or you got wet. If you don't come out like a dove you just got wet, not baptized. If you been baptized then you know the justice that needs to flow like a stream from the Heavenly reservoir. If you baptized then you working for peace, justice, and Jesus love. And if you are hurting folks or being silent, like I said, maybe you just got wet.”

Couldn't said it better myself-----baptism is the water of change, it changes vipers to dove, the broken to whole and those who sit and complain to those who follow so in a merciful way it is death by drowning.