



# Religious Heritage and Water Management

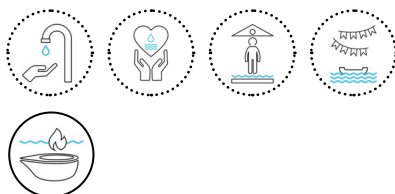
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*Water is central to most religions. However, the treatment of water in those religions is often far from holy. With examples from the Netherlands and Indonesia, this article shares insights concerning the intricate link between water, religion and world views. In recent decades, religious and interreligious institutions and organizations have taken stands against wastage and pollution and for the sustainable uses of water. As it turns out, religion can be an obstacle to, but also a source of, environment-friendly practices.*



## KEY THEMES







^ Fig. 2 The mouth of Het Meer in the river Waal, near Nijmegen. In the background is Ooyse Schependom; the Ooyse Gate is in the foreground (Source: Roger Veringmeier, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).





Water has a special place in most religions (McAnally 2018). In Christianity, water is associated with baptism: every church has a baptismal font. In Judaism, washing your hands before and after meals is mandatory. Muslims believe that every living thing is created from water; they use water five times a day for the ritual washing before prayer. In front of every mosque, there are water taps or water basins that meet the requirements of Islamic jurisprudence (at least two-by-two meters in size and 30 centimeters deep). In Buddhism, water is used for funerals. In Hinduism, water is imbued with powers of spiritual purification, and for Hindus, morning cleansing with water is a daily obligation.

This is not to say that religious leaders are at the forefront of water preservation or that religious institutions act in an environment-friendly manner. The holy river Ganges is heavily polluted, including with human excrement, flower and food offerings, and rotting cadavers. Muslims use about 25 liters of water for ritual ablution per day (5 liters per wash), which, according to a strict interpretation of Islamic law, cannot be reused because once used, it is impure. The waters of the Jordan are a source of conflict between Jews and Arabs. Indonesia – home to the largest Muslim population in the world – has the most polluted rivers. Countries with a predominantly Buddhist population are not doing much better. In Thailand, water consumption per capita is the highest in the world. The water here is also heavily polluted, especially from agriculture. The annual Water Festival or Thai New Year, so popular with tourists, uses about 30 million cubic meters of water, while droughts are prevalent in parts of the country.

Yet, a green consciousness and climate activism is emerging within religions. The Roman Catholic Church released the Encyclical Letter



^ Fig. 3 Ritual washing (Source: Frans Wijssen).

Laudato Si' on the care for our common home; it has a full section on "the issue of water" (Pope Francis 2015, 27–31). The World Council of Churches has had a long-lasting program on justice, peace and the wholeness of creation. The leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church is a pioneer of environmentalism within Christianity; he is known as the "green" patriarch. Islamic scholars have released the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change. Hindus and Buddhists fight against water wastage and pollution (Hasselaar and Ijmker 2021).

From 2002 until 2008, Radboud University led the EU-sponsored Freude am Fluss program, and initiated the Waal Weelde (Wealthy Waal) project in 2005. In this project, religious institutes were seen as cultural heritage to be preserved, not as living traditions that inspire human behavior. Yet the researchers also concluded that

various worldviews underlie types of river management (Wijssen and Saptaningtyas 2021, 165 to 167). In order to acquire a better understanding of the relationship between world views and support for sustainable river management, they developed the Humans and Nature scale. This scale has been validated and used in numerous studies in Western Europe (De Groot, Drenthen and De Groot 2011), North America (De Groot and van den Born 2007) and South-East Asia (Duong and Van den Born 2019).

Since 2012, the insights gained from the Waal Weelde project have been shared with partners in Indonesia. In addition to high levels of pollution in its rivers, Indonesia is facing regular floods due to climate change. Faith-based organizations there have become active in climate change mitigation and adaptation and have been promoting a green and clean Islam.

Based on a common history, rooted in 350 years of Dutch colonial expansion in Indonesia, comparing the Netherlands and Indonesia can help illuminate how religion can be both an obstacle to, and a source of, environment-friendly practices.

Radboud University has been involved in the Alliance for Water Health and Development, an alliance of universities in the Netherlands and Indonesia and non-governmental organizations working on water-related health and development issues. The alliance established the Living Lab Water Indonesia Platform (Wijsen and Saptaningtyas 2021, 167–69). Radboud University is also involved in the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relationships, an inter-university network focusing on education, gender and ecology, in collaboration with Christian and Muslim organizations in the Netherlands and Indonesia. It has a number of water-related projects, such as one involving the recycling of ablution water and a study of the production and distribution of mineral water by Islamic boarding schools.

In Indonesia, my doctoral candidate and I focus on faith-based organizations such as Nadhlatul Ulama (which claims to have 80 million members) and Muhammadiyah (which claims to have 60 million members) and the development of Islamic jurisprudence on water. In 2016, the Fatwā and Islamic Research Council of Muhammadiyah published guidelines in “The Islamic View of Water Use and Conservation.” In 2019, Muhammadiyah successfully fought a “constitutional jihad” against the privatization of the water sector in Indonesia. In the Netherlands, we focus on water awareness within the organizations of Green Churches (350 members) and Green Mosques (35 members) and the “implicit religiosity” in the environmentalism movement. Many religious leaders are united in the Faith for

Earth initiative of the United Nations Environment Program. Given the importance of water in most religions, this shouldn’t be a surprise. Together with the Parliament of the World’s Religions, this organization published a book entitled *Faith for the Earth, a Call for Action* in 2020. Critics say that faith-based organizations come too late and are too slow. They do have a point. Yet, for most people in this world, religion plays an important role in their decision making and religious leaders have moral authority. Despite the ambivalence indicated at the beginning, religions, being both obstacle and source of environment-friendly practices, can make a difference in integral water management.

#### **Acknowledgment**

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