

# Blue Paper #4: World Views and Water Management

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*Frans Wijsen*

**Whereas water is central to most religions, the treatment of water is often far from holy. With case studies from the Netherlands and Indonesia, Frans Wijsen (professor Empirical and Practical Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen) shares his insight into the intricate link between water and religion. As it turns out, religion can be an obstacle to, but also a source of, environment-friendly practices.**

Water has a special place in most religions. 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 everything living 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 a water basin that meets the requirements of Islamic jurisprudence (at least two by two meters in size and thirty 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 and that religious institutions act environment-friendly. The holy river Ganges is heavily polluted, including by 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 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, and it 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 *Laudato Si'* on the care for our common home. The World Council of Churches has had a long-lasting program on justice, peace and wholeness of creation. The Eastern Orthodox Church has a 'green' patriarch. Islamic scholars have released the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change. Hindus and Buddhists fight against water wastage and pollution.

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

world views underly types of river management. In order to acquire deeper insight into the relationship between world views and support for river management, they developed the Humans and Nature scale.

Since 2012, the insights gained from the *Waal Weelde* project have been shared with partners in Indonesia. Indonesia has some of the most polluted rivers in the world and faces regular floods due to climate change. Faith-based organizations there have become active in climate change mitigation and adaptation and promoting a green and clean Islam. Based on a common history, comparing The Netherlands and Indonesia gives insight into religion as 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 Netherlands and Indonesian universities and non-governmental organizations working on water-related health- and development issues. It established the Living Lab Water Indonesia Platform. Radboud University is also involved in the Netherlands Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relationships, an inter-university network focusing on the education, gender and ecology, in collaboration with Christian and Muslim organizations in The Netherlands and Indonesia ([www.nicmcr.org](http://www.nicmcr.org)). It has a number of water-related projects, such as recycling of ablution water and a study of production and distribution of mineral water by Islamic boarding schools.

In Indonesia, we 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 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*, further drawing attention to faith-based ways of addressing a sustainable future.

#### *Acknowledgement*

*The Blue Papers* is a series of thought-provoking short essays on water. Authors have been invited by the platform [Water Values: Connecting Past, Present & Future](#), an initiative of ICOMOS-NL, TU Delft and University of Groningen to argue the importance of heritage and a cultural approach within water related challenges. The papers were edited by PCF's Carola Hein and Hilde Sennema. Frans Wijzen is professor of Empirical and Practical Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen; and director of the Netherlands School of Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion.

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