



# THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TACKLING WATER CHALLENGES AROUND THE WORLD

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Whitepaper - June 2022

## INTRODUCTION

*At the Round Table of November 1st, 2021, representatives of the cities of Jakarta, Cape Town and Amsterdam, reflected on how water and climate challenges can be addressed by the religious communities and their leaders.*

Although the world was in a lockdown, the various stakeholders felt the urge to congregate and continue to inspire each other and explore further collaborations. The Round Table is a continuation of the critical water conversations initiated during the water symposium in Amsterdam on November 6th and 7th 2019 as a side event to the 2019 Amsterdam International Water Week. The water symposium was called “Water in Times of Climate Change” and aimed to encourage dialogue between cities, activists, scientists, governments, businesses, NGOs, and religious communities. In enabling such dialogue, the symposium unpacked water issues facing three cities (Amsterdam, Jakarta, and Cape Town) from the viewpoint of science, politics, economics, and religion. Although stakeholders in science, politics, and economics are constantly invited into conversations regarding water sustainability, religion is not often invited to the proverbial table, despite the obvious value it can add.

This Round Table is not the only follow up of the conversations. Partners involved are also developing a journey of hope on climate adaptation between Indonesia and the Netherlands, as well as a community enrolment and safe spaces in Cape Town, to build trust and inclusion regarding water and sanitations. Additionally, several (student) research projects run and a bachelor course on religion and sustainable development in Amsterdam was developed.

Considering the successful engagement during the 2019 symposium, these critical water conversations are continued in the present Round Table. Instead of inviting all the usual stakeholders to lead the discussion, contributions were (actual and potential) of religious communities and leaders to the water challenges faced by communities across the globe. However, the dialogues still essentially include political, scientific, and economic perspectives. Using the case studies of Amsterdam/the Netherlands, Jakarta/Indonesia and Cape Town/South Africa, the following aspects were explored at the Round Table:

1. What religious principles and values could contribute to our approach to tackling water challenges around the world?
2. How are religious leaders and communities currently contributing to managing water in times of climate change?
3. What additional potential contributions could religious leaders and communities make to managing water crises?
4. How to stimulate cooperation between religion, government, business, and academia on shared issues related to water and climate change?

The aim of the round table is to facilitate and continue the multi-stakeholder dialogue, to exchange practices, and to identify opportunities for collaborations.

## SUMMARY

On the 1st of November, Jan Jorrit Hasselaar and Geke van Vliet (Netherlands), Rachel Mash (South Africa), Maharani Hapsari (Indonesia) presented case studies in relation to the focus points described above. This summary is a reflection of the presentations and dialogues at the round table.

### Rachel Mash

*Environmental coordinator, Anglican Church of Southern Africa*

It's time for action, we know what we have to do. Working for water is a spiritual thing. In a video message Archbishop of Cape Town Thabo Makgoba mentions the principle of Ubuntu, which considers a person to be a person through other people. This implies that how we treat other people defines our humanity. Cape Town unfortunately is one of the most unequal cities in the world. Which is reflected in terms of access to clean water.

"Water is life, sanitation is dignity, access to clean drinking water is a right of all human beings.  
Water is a gift from God, it should not be commodified."

<b>AWARENESS RAISING: A CONFERENCE AROUND DAY ZERO ON HOW COULD THE CHURCH RESPOND, WITH AMONG OTHERS A TALK FROM PROFESSOR KEVIN WINTER, RESEARCHING CAPE TOWN RESIDENTIAL SUBURBS DAY ZERO AVERT ACTIONS</b>	<b>WE HAD COMPETITIONS AND WHERE PEOPLE COULD BE EXCITED TO SEE HOW MUCH WATER THEY COULD SHARE</b>	<b>HOLD DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOW THE CHURCH WOULD MOBILIZE AROUND GETTING WATER TO THOSE WHO COULD NOT CARRY IT FOR THEMSELVES</b>
<b>A WATER INJUSTICE CONFERENCE AT THE CATHEDRAL WHERE WE INVITED DIFFERENT INTERFAITH SPEAKERS AND TO SPEAK AROUND THE CONCEPT OF INJUSTICES OF WATER AND HOW FAITH COMMUNITIES COULD RESPOND PRACTICALLY WITHIN OUR OWN ANGLICAN TRADITION</b>	<b>A SERIES OF SUNDAY SERVICES WHERE THERE WERE SERMONS AND PRAYERS PREPARED</b>	<b>WE ENCOURAGED THE YOUTH TO PUT OUT 40 DAYS OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS LOOKING AT THE SCRIPTURES THAT TALK ABOUT WATER AND INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH THERE ARE 722 VERSES IN OUR BIBLE WHICH TALK ABOUT WATER</b>
<b>WE BEGAN TO MAKE THE LINK WITH BAPTISM ALL CHRISTIANS ARE BAPTIZED INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD THROUGH WATER AND SO THEREFORE WATER IS OUR SACRED ELEMENT</b>	<b>ON PRACTICAL LEVEL: WE ENCOURAGED CHURCHES AND CHURCH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES TO PUT IN WATER SAVING DEVICES</b>	<b>WE HAD WATER FESTIVALS AT CHURCHES WHERE PEOPLE WOULD HAVE A FESTIVAL WHERE THEY WOULD SHARE DIFFERENT WAYS TO SAVE WATER</b>

Rachel Mash presents the diversity of actions that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa initiated in response to Day Zero, the day Cape Town was told the taps of the entire city of would be turned off.

For Mash, all these actions may inspire others around the world for what all can be done to inspire, engage and mobilize people, and most of all, bring them together. Mash describes that Cape Town managed to push Day Zero back. The community is very proud that they together reduced their water usage by 50% and thereby were able to slowly push back Day Zero until the point where the rains came again. However, the uncertainty remains. What does the future hold in the light of all climate change around the world?

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world in terms of the Gini-coefficient. Mash urges the need to continue to raise issues of sanitation and access to water the citizens of Cape Town. In 2018 the urgency was high for all citizens, but many people in the townships of Cape Town live Day Zero every day. Their taps don't work, they have to carry water, etc.

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba several years ago led an interfaith walk of witness where they went to see for themselves the conditions that people are living in. We know that climate change predictions are that there will be more water scarcity and one of the things that we've learned from the Day Zero is that because people put in boreholes during the drought, we now have a risk of the underground water. Therefore, one of the things that we are doing as a church is that we formed a partnership with WWF and we brought together a group of young people, called the 'The Water Disciples' and the Anglican Church will be partnering with The Table Mountain Water Source Partnership where we look at how we as the community of Cape Town can protect the water under the ground which is at risk next.

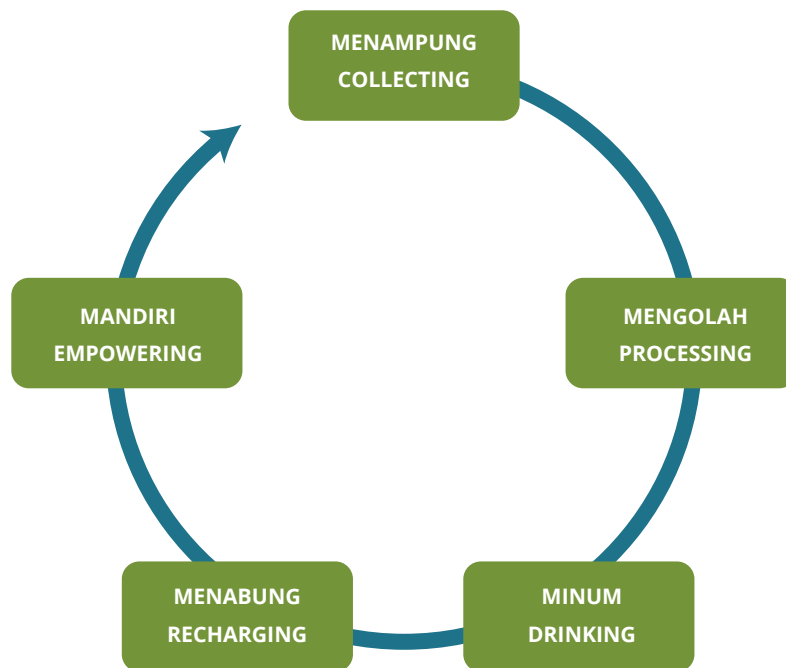
## **Maharani Hapsari**

*Lecturer, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia: Towards Climate Leadership Rain Harvesting Practices among Religious Communities in Indonesia*

Maharani Hapsari shared about her research conducted in 2019 in the Banyu Bening Community in Yogyakarta, following an Islamic-based rain harvesting movement found in 2012 by Sri Wahyuningsih and Kamaludin. From a small local community, it became a nation-wide and inter-religious network, finally establishing a rain harvesting school in 2019. The network encompasses participation and engagement of grassroots communities, schools, universities, researchers, national and subnational governance, NGOs and the business sector.

## **Providing water has philosophical implications**

In the Koran, water is perceived as a living being to be treated respectfully knowledge and the benefits from utilizing run water is something to be shared with others and other human species. Thereby, rain harvesting becomes a spiritual practice, and is used as a means for activists to respond to systematic weaknesses of the current social order. Likewise, it is a way for the community to preserve their own lives and the lives of others. The community actively acquires and mobilizes knowledge by engaging with many different aspects in society. In an effort to make their ideological commitment concrete the community has adopted the practices of seeing water as 'sodaqoh', taken from the interpretation of Hadith; water as fellow living being, the source of live. Providing free water to other living beings, has philosophical implications, it counteracts with power relations, that produce the persistent socioeconomic exclusions of humans and other living beings, as well as how we treat our environment. This understanding is something we can share, to inspire others. The figure below depicts the Community of Practice of the Banyu Bening community from survival to holistic spiritual practice.



The activities conducted in these communities are organized into four aspects:

1. The rain harvesting school where weekly classes are conducted to disseminate knowledge on producing drinking water through the electrolysis method. Practicing science as co-productions the community engages in technical collaboration with other religious communities, university, and private scientists as well as government institutions dealing with water management
2. Secondly, children are taught about plastic waste collection and processing, as well as languages, and culture preservation by singing and dancing and theater classes
3. Third, is the development of sustainable community livelihoods. The communities have produced natural fertilizers from rainwater, and this has been used by farmers community in Jakarta in other cities in Indonesia
4. Fourth is policy reflection, learning and collaboration. The communities are actively involved in various lectures seminars and workshops and collaborate with the national agency for disaster mitigation. Additionally, many dialogues were held with a wide range of Indonesian communities, parliament members and other governmental organizations, student organizations and international visits.

### **Possibilities for inter-religious collaboration and leadership**

Hapsari shows with her research that the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Indonesia opens the broader conditions of possibility to think about elevating community-based rain harvesting practices. Religious leaders and communities are the integral forces of the global collective action to counter climate change through managing water. The alliances of spiritual ecology practices manifest in various aspects of community likelihood towards a broader base of religious leadership. Policy reflection and learning is enabled through dense informal interreligious networks nurtured by the spirit of solidarity against inequality.

### **Continuation**

Across the world rain harvesting has the potential to develop more collaboration in every religion what is treated as holy's holy source of life inter-religious beliefs wisdom and practices are promising avenues for us

to think about further possible efforts that can be initiated across governments, business communities and academia. Therefore, Hapsari calls for three possible actions to advance further collaboration

1. the multi-disciplinary research platform on rain harvesting and circular economy approach
2. transnational co-production of rain harvesting technology involving inter-religious actions
3. inter-religious forum on rain harvesting and climate change

## Geke van Vliet

*MA-student on religion and ecology in the Netherlands: presenting study about the (potential) role of religious communities on climate change adaptation in Amsterdam*

Geke van Vliet among others aims with her research to inspire churches to collaborate more with other organizations in the light of climate change. She notices in her research that

- Churches keep themselves from reaching out to other organizations churches
- Churches seem to have trouble with engaging in the discourse on climate change
- Many churches are declining in numbers, consisting of small communities with elderly members
- The initiatives churches undertake are small and isolated such as waste separation solar panels and having small gardens the actions are very practical, but they do not support a bigger narrative

Thus Van Vliet shows that churches feel they have a lack of human power to be a driving force in the ecological debate and if churches keep on engaging with only practical and isolated actions and are not willing to reach out to other organizations they will not achieve their full potential and will not be a driving force.

## Christianity as a counter-narrative

Van Vliet however sees that religious communities do have a lot of potential to contribute. They have a long tradition of contemplation, hope and inspiration and this tradition is where they can make an impactful difference. All practical initiatives aside, the distinctive voice of religious communities can be found in their worldview. It is their tradition of contemplation and hope that can make a difference. In Van Vliet's research, respondents of churches in Amsterdam shared that they feel an urgency to act and that something needs to happen now, however the church's urgency to affect change can also be addressed in more effective non-practical ways. Christianity has an influence in the anthropocentric narrative of today and it has the potential to offer a counter-narrative. This narrative is one of hope and transformation.

## Theology of Hope

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, gives such a narrative in his work 'Theology of Hope'. The uncertainty the future brings, Moltmann claims, should give us hope. Hope does not orientate us at an Utopia, a promised land somewhere in the future, rather, it highlights in the present the land of the promise. We can exchange promises to go on a journey and learn together how to create a future for all hope is just beyond where we are. The only thing we have to do is to respond to its goal. In the words of Amanda Gorman's poem recited at the inauguration of Joe Biden in January of this year:

"There is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it."  
—Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

## Hope as empowerment for transformation

Van Vliet argues that churches need to see that they are not going to change the world by just separating waste. What churches have to offer is hope and reflection that keeps us from being paralyzed by despair and that empowers us towards an ongoing transformative attitude. This can be an inspiration to others and should be accompanied by braveness to be open towards others in the hope of changing our narrative that has been all too dominant. Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize of Peace, started the Green Belt Movement. A movement that plants millions of trees in Africa. Sadly she passed away in 2011 but her work is ongoing. May her work be an inspiration to churches.

“The planting of trees is the planting of ideas. By starting with the simple act of planting a tree we give hope to ourselves and to future generations.”

—Wangari Maathai

An ideal combination of action and reflection, of seeing the land of the promise in the present.

## Dialogue

*Sebastiaan Messerschmidt, Consul General in Cape Town (South Africa)*

*Dr. Tebaldo Vinciguerra, Holy See: Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development*

*Caroline Weijers, Ambassador Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Holy See*

Sebastiaan Messerschmidt and Caroline Weijers reflect on the (future) implications of the shared best practices. Messerschmidt feels inspired, provided with insights in that and how religion understands the sustainability issues. At its core, religion understands and encompasses love, respect, and connection, not only to the now but also to the future, so it transcends own life questions to the bigger picture and then of course the picture is what we are dealing with today.

## Religion as awareness mobilizer actor, catalyzer, and connector

The project of Hapsari shows how interreligious projects can act as a catalyst, being a transformative force, the research of van Vliet shows that there is room to be an influencer as church, providing a new narrative. Religious communities have a pivotal role to play in making sure the narrative changes. Also, as shown and called for by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, religion is and can be a connecting factor, bringing a wide range of actors together, bringing various religions together, aiming for inclusion and to overcome inequality in society.

## Collaborations on global scale

Messerschmidt brings up the question how to communicate as religions on a global scale with big influencing organizations such as the UN. Rachel Mash first points us at the challenge that many NGO's and powerful governances are based in the northern hemisphere, where the influence of religion is less than in the southern hemisphere. So often they do not actually think about religion as part of the civil society movement. They will interconnect with civil society but they won't think about religions as a very powerful and important role player. On the other hand, the important role of the UN environmental program should be recognized, who are particularly open to the role of faith communities. In fact they formed an organization called Faith for Earth, with many task teams being set up and much up and over 400 accredited faith based organizations in the program. Also, umbrella organizations have large scale collaboration initiatives. Such as the World Council of Churches, which has the Ecumenical Water Initiative, which brings together many actors.

Also Weijers mentions that Vatican is very much involved in environmental issues. And many initiatives have been taken by the Catholic Church in that area. Pope Francis published the Encyclical *Laudato Si* 2015, often frivolously described as the bible for the environmental movement and water. And last year's Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* covers anything from just to unjust, where again environmental issues, such as access to water, are an essential element in striving for social equality. Even more recently and very concretely, there have been the joint declaration by Pope Francis the archbishop of Canterbury and the patriarch of Constantinople, thereby covering already large communities. And this was followed by another declaration exactly four weeks ago by more than 30 prominent religious leaders from all over the world.

So on the one hand these organizations and networks can be even more strengthened, and on the other hand we need to recognize the challenges and encourage the northern hemisphere countries to think about religion and put it on their agendas. Also, we should not underestimate the importance of the three leaders of the biggest Christian denominations on this planet, for the first time in history, have made a joint statement, the joint statement around caring for creation. And also see the positiveness that the climate is bringing those denominations together, representing over 2 billion people on this planet.

### **Shared language**

Another point brought up was whether and how the identity of being Christian could be a starter for feeling 'as an individual that I am also a person that can make my city, and from that identity, I am actually willing to make the city more climate friendly'. Related to this, someone shared the challenge that many organizations often are hesitating in joining networks, and wonders whether this is rather willingness based or more language based in the sense of understanding each other.

van Vliet adds that the people in her research discuss climate issues on a societal lever rather than on a spiritual level. While the spiritual level could be where they can spark change. The language of hope speaks to an intrinsic motivation, that can move anyone in what kind of organization, people need that kind of energy to actually makes the change.

### **Balancing global and local action**

The various levels of interaction with faith communities are pointed at. Rachel Mash identifies a trickle-down effect. The archbishop can make a statement, but do the churches and parishes make any difference? We are all slowly trying to change the DNA of the church, so we must keep on doing that. If we look at local level, for example now in the municipal elections in South Africa, water is much mentioned in the manifestos. However, at the same time, Amazon is granted to build a call center in one of the recharge areas for the Lisbek river. At global level the pope, archbishop and patriarch stand together against for example commodification of water as a principle and on the local level we can fight these developments. Local churches, mosques and synagogues are now getting involved in a campaign against that.

### **Holistic approach of sustainability issues**

The last point brought up is how religious organizations can shift to integrated water with food energy and waste. Hapsari brings the example of the Banyu Baning community, where engagement between rain harvesting the circular economy approach is applied. On global level, the connection and integration of religious statements about for example poverty, with the SDG's is urged. Also, the different options to focus on institutionalization of sustainability at different levels, or focusing at transformation on individual levels, show the multiple paths to consider in bringing together religion and sustainability.

Hapsari warns however not to make everything about upscaling. She shows the value of micro practices in



offering a specific kind of transformation as we go deep into self-reflection about who we are and how can understand ourselves as religious person or self, which can help us to understand the planetary nature of our being.

## **FOLLOW-UP**

What was said? What comes up? Are there new insights? Are there next steps? What can be discussed with whom? We hope to be able to initiate this by means of the above reflection of the dialogue. Different worlds were represented in the session, religion, politics, science, and social organizations. Although the world was in a lockdown, the various stakeholders felt the urge to congregate, to share best practices and explore further collaborations. Three cities now shared best practices; however the network will take the conversation broader and further, including other cities facing the same climate and water challenges and we certainly will continue to look for opportunities to bring people together to compare experiences to compare best practices and to make sure that the right people are sitting at the decision tables when it comes to policy and implementation.

The best practices highlighted the challenges and practices of how religious communities on a local level can be an actor and a catalyst, being a change of narrative, which can influence policy. Lastly the power of religion in representing so many people and connecting them all together as a capillary network to address the climate issues.

The discussion and the depth of the Round Tables could extend further. And the nuances can be deepened, beyond the general narrative. A challenge is also for this story to disseminate further into the veins of our network organizations. The participation in the past Round Tables expresses the energy there is among these organizations. A follow-up conference was already held the 27th of January 2022. Additionally, an interview and podcast has been published with Archbishop Thabo Makgoba during the closing of a project on water and sanitation between Cape Town and Amsterdam, a result of the 2019-watersymposium. Concrete steps are set on cooperation based on hope in climate change in and between Cape Town and Amsterdam, summer 2023.

## **SELECTED REFERENCES**

Moltmann, J. (2004). *Im Ende-der Anfang: eine kleine Hoffnungslehre*. Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus.  
<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>

### **Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development**

Through a range of activities, the Amsterdam Center for Religion and Sustainable Development (ACRSD) initiates a dynamic interaction between scientific disciplines and social partners around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from an extensive and relevant national and international network. Around many of the SDG challenges, religion (including spiritual and secular worldviews) plays or can play an important role. However, the specific contributions of religion, both the maintenance of certain problems and the overcoming of them, are often less clear. The ACRSD therefore focuses on the interaction between religion (including secular worldviews) and sustainable development. More information about the Amsterdam Center for Sustainability & Religion via <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/research-institutes/amsterdam-centre-for-religion-and-sustainable-development>

*Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam June 2022*