

## Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue

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### Overcoming the divides to care for our environment

Environmental care has been a longstanding question for religions of the world, taking on a sense of urgency lately that is particularly seen in the world's water resources. In built-up environments from Cape Town to the waterways of Indonesia and Britain, water resources are reported to be depleted, over-used and polluted. In the natural environment, seasonal water provision is noted to be imbalanced, with prolonged periods of drought interspersed with increased precipitation leading to regular flooding and oversaturation of the ground (Tabari 2020, 13768). Debates about the causes of these problems include the privatization and commodification of water for monetary gain or the disproportionate use of water for agriculture and industry (Moore 2021, 797–813). While the debates over causes continue, the root of the problem is evidently a breakdown in the relationship between humanity and the earth's water, seen in the suffering by humans and animals in localized environments that leads to social instability and retreating biodiversity. The response to these crises is most often framed through the humanitarian challenge that details ethnographic and ecological specifics of regions affected in relation to climate change and the monetary value of needs in each case. It has been recognized for some time now that religious values play an important role alongside the cost-benefit analysis of environmental care, and that alliances may be formed between secularists and religious adherents in addressing its causes. However, the theoretical analysis of challenges and

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their resolutions tends to fall into divides between the secular or the religious, local over-and-against global, and theological versus practical, i.e. scientific and financial measures (Fisher-Ogden and Saxer 2006, 64).

This series of two special issues considers a comparative Islamic study in taking Muslim and Christian responses to water resources as constituent of human relationships in the ecological environment across divides. A common conception may be that Muslims and Christians are largely motivated by religious teaching or belief in their everyday behaviours and attitudes, and that they do not prioritize practical measures or collaboration. In their theological concepts of creation and divine sustenance of the earth, Christians and Muslims indeed share the view that the ultimate source of water is divine and both religions contain ritual practices that impart divinity to the role of water in religious life so that water is understood as a gift (Oestigaard 2021, 1093). Lings gives an explanation of the Qur'anic symbolism of water that is equally relevant to the Bible, "the link between the ideas of mercy and water—in particular rain—are in a sense inseparable" (Lings 1991, 67). However, the pragmatic and regional focus of most of the articles presented in this issue, first of two special issues, indicates the influence of realpolitik and localized conditions on the attitudes and behaviours of Christians and Muslims and the extent to which they relate to each other alongside other actors in the environment.

The first section brings together papers delivered at a conference of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies Oxford in 2022 that put out a call for papers exploring the intersections of religion and water conservation in the title *Faith Saving Water*. The collection shows that the dynamic interplay of the local environment together with the human will to survive or thrive may be seen to create a contextual spirituality. That is, spirituality as the integration of religious and practical measures that takes shape between endemic expressions of nature appreciation, theological motivations and political relations with fellow inhabitants in the local environment (Roehlkepartain, Benson and Scales 2011, 1007). In this dynamic, water is seen to be commodified and competed over by formal (state) actors and a means of relationship in more localized settings. The interrelatedness of the local and the formal appear in the extent to which faith leaders or religiously-shaped narrative is included in formal processes of water management. This in turn affects the local relationships to constitute a localized movement or common obligation that constitutes the contextual spirituality.

The first article by Ulrika Mårtensson develops the Qur'anic presentation of water and gardens as a social imperative for Islamic governance. Mårtensson constructs socio-legal and theoretical contexts to argue that the Qur'an links faith with the security of rain or wells. By examining historical agricultural practices, the article suggests that Qur'anic teachings may be related to wider socio-legal theory of water management at the time of its origin. This contextual reading provides new insight into the socio-legal milieu of the Qur'an and may inform modern sustainable practice and theory as a result. It presents a historical precedent of a contextual spirituality deriving from the governance of water provision.

Kholoud Al-Ajarma's article explores the historical and spiritual significance of two sacred water springs in Palestine. By drawing on the narratives of Palestinian women elders, the article demonstrates how these springs serve as sites of cultural and religious convergence for Muslims and Christians. Al-Ajarma's description of practices and their significance for women as neighbours demonstrate a contextual spirituality determined by gender in the contestations of faith and territory in Palestine. The study highlights the role of sacred spaces in fostering community resilience and environmental stewardship amidst ongoing geopolitical challenges.

In their collaborative article, Georgina Jardim and Henrietta Cozens present an inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians through a community led project in the UK called "Women at the Well." This initiative brought together women from both faiths to engage in theological exchange and practical environmental action that created a cross-cultural contextual spirituality. The authors highlight the importance of inclusive dialogue and the transformative potential of collective interfaith efforts in addressing environmental challenges for the community as a whole.

The fourth article by Rana Abu-Mounes addresses the attitudes of Muslim and Christian faith leaders towards the water crisis in Jordan. It examines the potential for greater engagement of religious leaders in promoting water sustainability and the challenges they face. The article calls for enhanced collaboration between faith leaders, governments, and civil society to create a sustainable future for Jordan's water resources. As such, Abu-Mounes's article questions the extent to which official bodies develop an indigenous spirituality that is relatable to the local context.

Finally, Aida Abd El Rehim's article analyses the water crisis in Egypt, focusing on the socio-political dynamics surrounding the Nile River.

Through the lens of securitisation theory, the article examines how religious leaders from Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox Church have mobilized their communities to support water conservation efforts. This study underscores the intersection of political and religious strategies in tackling water scarcity and the extent to which official bodies seek to articulate a new contextualized spirituality that unites citizens of a modern nation state.

Together, these articles introduce the effects of depleting water resources on community relations between Muslims, Christians and others, and the spirituality that develops where environmental frailty and human consumption intersect. They demonstrate that Islamic theological reflection takes place as it does for Christian expressions in a dynamic of community action, interfaith dialogue and religious teaching that activates various political and social responses to water conservation. In each case, the multi-layered approach results in a contextual spirituality, whether it is conducive or unfavourable towards environmental care, that takes effect at the level of individuals and local communities.

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