



Being with Water Otherwise: Sacred knowledge and sustainable water–human relations

University of Cambridge | 15–16 April 2024

Summary

Being with Water OTHERWISE brought together scholars, practitioners, and activists from diverse backgrounds to explore the intricate intersections of religion, water, and sustainability. Over the course of two days, participants engaged in thought-provoking discussions, presentations, and workshops that offered profound insights and lessons for addressing contemporary water challenges.¹

Drawing fresh insights

Day 1 focused on understanding water through sacred perspectives, challenging traditional paradigms, and reimagining human–water relations. The opening addresses called for a decolonisation of our conceptualisation of water, urging us to move beyond reductionist views and embrace sacred knowledge. They also outlined the multiplicity of projects that the Cambridge Interfaith Programme is engaged in to address the intersection of religion with different global challenges.

The first day took us on watery journeys from the Finnish and Canadian Circumpolar North, through British pilgrimage sites, Buryatia in Eastern Siberia, Northeast Australia, the Torres Strait and a Ghanaian mining village, as well as on a trip around the world with a profusion of serpentine water beings across different cultural contexts. Speakers raised questions about: a) the relational nature of water, emphasising its dynamic and reciprocal interactions with humans, including various forms of kinship with water beings; b) water management dynamics in relation to indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting the need to integrate diverse perspectives into water governance strategies; c) law's capacity to hear indigenous stories and understand markedly different relations to water, suggesting the need to expand the notion of evidence, but also think beyond law. Fittingly, given the emphasis on pilgrimage, the day ended with a punting trip on the River Cam.

¹ This report was created by Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović, the academic convenor of the conference. For any questions, you may get in touch with him at sh639@cam.ac.uk. Special thanks are owed to Dr Iona C. Hine and Dr Anastasia R. Badder for their exceptional intellectual insights and meticulous organisational efforts, which were instrumental in the success of the conference, as well as their valuable commentary on a draft of this report.

Day 2 delved into practical applications and collaborations. Contributors emphasised the importance of grassroots activism, religious teachings, and community-driven initiatives in promoting sustainable water practices.

The Cambridge research

Discussion of Dr Anastasia Badder's report, [Water and/in religious relations: a Cambridge study](#), illuminated the necessity of incorporating diverse cultural and religious perspectives into water management strategies, urging collaboration between water industry actors and impacted communities. Responding, Mumin Islam highlighted the challenges of integrating religious values into workplace practices within the water industry, stressing the importance of leveraging religious teachings for environmental stewardship. Professor Ian Barker echoed these sentiments, advocating for a paradigm shift in how water companies engage with communities and emphasising the transformative potential of integrating religious perspectives into water management practices.

Dr Badder had also invited an array of her interlocutors to contribute: Meg Clarke addressed local water quality issues in Cambridge, advocating for community-driven initiatives to protect and restore water sources. James Murray White shared personal reflections on the impact of pollution on local chalk streams, advocating for awareness-raising and community engagement in conservation efforts through storytelling and filmmaking. Tilak Parekh offered profound insights into the symbolic significance of water within Hinduism, highlighting its central role in religious rituals and spiritual practices. Professor Tony Booth's discussion on pressing environmental challenges facing the river Cam underscored the importance of recognising the river's rights and advocating for sustainable water management practices grounded in values-led educational development and inclusion.

The Scriptural Reasoning workshop provided an interlude between these discussions, illustrating the power of this practice to provide an inclusive platform, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among attendees. The water-based text pack was the same that had been used in November as part of the research process.

Key takeaways

Throughout the conference, several key lessons emerged:

Firstly, there is a pressing need for interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive approaches to water governance that incorporate diverse cultural and religious perspectives. Secondly, building trust and empathy between stakeholders is essential for fostering greater engagement and cooperation in addressing water challenges. Thirdly, grassroots activism and community-driven initiatives play a crucial role in promoting sustainable water practices and environmental stewardship. Finally, recognising the relational nature of water and its intrinsic value beyond mere resource extraction is fundamental to reshaping human–water relations in a more sustainable direction.

In conclusion, the conference provided a valuable platform for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, highlighting the profound significance of water in human culture and the urgent need for collective action to ensure water security and sustainability for future generations. Attendees departed with a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between religion, water, and sustainability, as well as a renewed commitment to advancing innovative solutions and practices in water governance and management.

Being with Water OTHERWISE

Full report from Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović (academic convenor)

The two-day conference, Being with Water OTHERWISE: sacred knowledge and sustainable water–human relations (April 15th–16th, 2024) explored the intricate connections between diverse religious philosophies, sacred knowledge, and sustainable water use. Organised by the Cambridge Interfaith Programme (CIP), the event aimed to investigate how religious perspectives can inform water regulation, challenge existing legal frameworks, and raise awareness about water scarcity, fostering a deeper understanding of water as more than just a resource.

Day 1: Interdisciplinary Research of Watery Relations

Decolonising water through long duration intimacies

Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović's opening address questioned the repercussions of the conceptual and practical separation between humans and water, noticing that it not applicable across diverse historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. Dr HadžiMuhamedović underscored the conference's aim to challenge hyphenated relations and rethink the instrumentalisation of water. He critically examined the concept of 'modern water' as an abstraction perpetuated by hegemonic structures, emphasising the need to move beyond reductionist perspectives towards more holistic understandings of water.

Turning to theoretical apparatuses and various case-studies, HadžiMuhamedović suggested the need for cross-disciplinary synergies towards alternative ways of being with water that resist dominant paradigms and embrace sacred knowledge. His address called for further attention to the methodologies and technologies of decolonising water by turning to the kinds of long duration intimacies and sacred knowledges reported in the conference papers.

CIP's holistic environmental initiatives

Professor Esra Özyürek, in her welcome address, underscored the multifaceted nature of the conference's themes and the urgent need for interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing global water challenges. Drawing attention to CIP's [Religion and Global Challenges Initiative](#) and the collaborative work with Cambridge Water and South Staffs for the Ofwat Innovation Fund, Professor Özyürek emphasised the intersectionality of religion, environment, migration, and displacement in shaping human relations with water. She highlighted work including Dr Anastasia Badder's report [Water and/in religious relations](#) and the CIP Reading Group on [Religion and Ecology](#), indicating a commitment to fostering ongoing dialogue and research in these areas.

Moreover, Professor Özyürek announced upcoming events like the [Religion and Climate Futures](#) academic summer school, co-convened by CIP and LSE Religion & Global Society, designed for advocates, policymakers, practitioners, and faith leaders. She also called attention to the [Global South Visiting Fellowships](#), signalling a dedication to inclusivity and global perspectives in addressing water sustainability. Professor Özyürek's address set the tone for a conference that seeks to bridge disciplinary boundaries and engage diverse perspectives in reimagining our relationship with water.

Watery worlds as a material and conceptual provocation to prediction and notions of environmental stability

In the first conference panel, Dr [Franz Krause](#) presented some critical anthropological perspectives on water dynamics in the Circumpolar North, challenging traditional notions of stability and planning in landscapes. Taking the cue from Doreen Massey's article *Landscape as a Provocation*, he directed attention to the various forms of material and social transformations and movements in fluvial catchment areas. Building on his ethnographic fieldwork along the Kemi River in north Finland and the Mackenzie River Delta in northwest Canada, Dr Krause emphasised the dynamic relations of/with water, highlighting its influence on the constitution of landscapes and challenging notions of solidity and stability.

Dr Krause illustrated how these water dynamics defy boundaries and disrupt predictions, both materially and conceptually. Along the Kemi River, the annual spring flood presents an unpredictable challenge for hydropower infrastructure managers, despite their technological advancements. Similarly, in the Mackenzie River Delta, thawing permafrost accelerates erosion, rendering settlements unviable and questioning traditional notions of fixed structures. What matters for the inhabitants of this delta, he suggested, is not simply that the world is changing, but how and for whose benefit it is changing. Dr Krause's presentation underscored the necessity of reimagining human–water relations in the Circumpolar North as a process of movement and transformation, challenging conventional understandings of landscape and climate change. We need to understand how people negotiate these uncertainties and overlapping rhythms.

Restoration of pilgrimage as restoration of ineffable water–human connections

Dr [Guy Hayward](#) explored the multifaceted significance of pilgrimage in fostering spiritual connections with nature and water, highlighting its role in cross-cultural spiritual practices. Dr Hayward delved into the societal problems pilgrimage addresses and its benefits, emphasising its role in facilitating cross-cultural spiritual practices. He discussed various pilgrim place categories, citing examples such as St Helen's Holy Well in Hastings and St Gwenfaen Well on Anglesey, and examined different types of pilgrim routes, drawing parallels between life's journey and a river's course.

Dr Hayward also shed light on the work of the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT), which he co-founded, describing the charity's efforts to overcome logistical challenges and promote awareness of pilgrimage. The presentation was augmented with a song celebrating the healing and purifying qualities of water, underscoring its central role in pilgrimage experiences. Through anecdotes and reflections on sacred sites, Dr Hayward invited participants to contemplate the ineffable connection between water, pilgrimage, and spirituality, suggesting a promising future for such old practices despite contemporary challenges.

Water and/as structural violence

In the proceeding discussion, conference participants suggested that we need to also think water as embroiled or co-opted into the structures of power, rather than as an always already innocent matter. The discussion turned to colonial interventions into indigenous water knowledge systems. Such violence sometimes resulted in erasure of communities and inherited environmental erudition. In other contexts, traditional practices survived by merging with new religious languages imposed by the colonisers. In a similar vein, participants discussed water's sociability through examples of water's healing agency and pilgrimage sites, noticing that they also open questions of access and alienation.

Community resilience, adaptive mechanisms and water management

Professor [Matthew Cotton](#)'s paper provided a comprehensive analysis of water management dynamics amidst the climate emergency, drawing from case studies in Iran, Kenya, Tanzania, and Bangladesh. The synthesis explored indigenous water management practices, socio-technical barriers, and innovative solutions across the water-energy-food nexus. In Iran, the study examined traditional water values and practices, highlighting the intricate relationship between social hierarchy, land ownership, and religious beliefs in water management. This case study considered 'bilateral compensatory mutual assistance', a system through which the landowners who received more water also gave back more food to the community.

The paper also delved into agrivoltaic systems in East Africa, focusing on their potential to reduce water evaporation and address gendered labour burdens. Additionally, it discussed climate adaptation efforts in Bangladesh's Bay of Bengal region, emphasising the social and emotional attachments to water bodies amid increasing climate risks. Issues of faith had been primarily framed as a risk problem, for example the assignment of climate change and water scarcity to divine providence. However, Professor Cotton underscored the importance of further researching religious knowledge and structures as protective factors and valuable resources in relation to contemporary water management strategies to address the challenges posed by climate change effectively.

Water management and stewardship between heterogenous (religious–scientific) repertoires

Dr Alesia Ofori's paper challenged the dichotomy between indigenous and modern knowledge, arguing instead for the recognition of hybridised knowledge systems that emerge through negotiation and contestation. Focusing on a Ghanaian mining village, Dr Ofori illustrated how indigenous knowledge, influenced by both traditional and modern ideologies, shapes perceptions and practices regarding water management.

The paper described traditional water–human relations in a critical move beyond Integrated Water Resources Management. Water is agentive. It blesses, cures infertility, and heals other ailments, but also guards the village from thieves, bad people, and evil forces. It reveals itself in dreams. Rivers are children of God or, as in the case of the Tano River, one of the biggest water systems in Ghana, the tributaries are the river's offspring. They may be evoked or consulted for specific events. Traditional beliefs related to rivers stipulate various laws and taboos, including those of accessibility (who can engage with a river and when). When the agentive river is resting, between dusk and dawn, it does not tolerate noise. Respect for the river's period of repose also functions to bring calm to the village. The village founder is said to have consulted an oracle whose instruction was to worship the river in order to sustain the settlement.

The mining that started in 2010 had significantly polluted the village river in less than a decade, yet traditional knowledge was still being used by the miners to justify their ongoing work. Dr Ofori thus methodologically turned to the concept of bricolage, examining the blending of indigenous beliefs with modern influences, such as mining activities, revealing the complexity of environmental stewardship in rapidly changing socio-economic contexts. This conceptual apparatus allowed her to frame a space of water–human relations that draws on heterogenous repertoires, from diverse religious traditions to new forms of scientific water management. Dr Ofori emphasised the importance of understanding such contextual intricacies and hybrid knowledge systems as they adapt and evolve amidst contemporary challenges. Informing sustainable resource management practices requires imaginative methods and methodologies derived from within the researched contexts.

Trust in water managers, 'traditional water' and 'modern water'

During the discussion session, various pertinent points were raised, reflecting on the lack of trust in governmental bodies as opposed to traditional water stewards, the relationship between water scarcity and migration patterns, and the influence of legal frameworks across different states. 'Fatalism' or resignation to divine will was considered in light of unpredictable circumstances, suggesting its potential value in situations where planning becomes challenging.

Discussion was particularly drawn to the resistant traditional imperative to appease the river, drawing a contrast between traditional water sources, revered for their

healing properties, and modern water contaminated with chemicals. These insights underscored the complex interplay between cultural beliefs, environmental degradation, and governmental policies in shaping community responses to water management challenges.

A ‘Lusocene’ turn? Water kinship and spiritual intimacy with water

Dr [Sayana Namsaraeva](#)’s paper described the fascinating world of water-based kinship among the Mongolian-speaking peoples of Inner Asia, highlighting social ties formed around water-sharing practices. This kinship extends beyond human relationships to include connections with local water-owning deities, known as *lus*. Such ‘water kinship’ is then governed by the same rules as ‘blood kinship’.

Drawing on ethnographic and historical accounts from Buryatia in Eastern Siberia, Dr Namsaraeva described how these communities engage in rituals and beliefs surrounding water deities, envisioning a dynamic exchange between humans and the ‘more-than-human’ world. Endowed with powers, the water beings are worshipped for health. People are familiar with them, visit them with offerings, and communicate with them. There is dynamic ‘crossing’ between the *lus* and the human realms, in the form of bi-directional transmigration. Humans particularly skilled at water communication may be reincarnated *lus*. For example, a person who discovered three hundred wells in his locality was referred to as ‘embodied *lus*’.

Dr Namsaraeva proposed that such forms of spiritual water relations challenge the dominant anthropocentric perspectives of water and that we might think through the concept of ‘Lusocene’ as a critical path beyond the ‘Anthropocene’. As a paradigm shift from the conventional modern approaches to water management and extractivism, the paper offered a path to water sustainability based on respect and appreciation of water–human entanglements.

From law to lore? Listening for indigenous water relations

Professor [Gina Heathcote](#) delved into the dynamics of water–human relationships, community structures, and legal frameworks in Northern Australia and the Torres Strait Islands within the context of settler-colonialism’s enduring legal languages and structures. Professor Heathcote considered the potential implications of recognising sea rights for saltwater people on inland water issues, seeking to move beyond conventional legal notions tied to land ownership and economic resources. Through an analysis of recent jurisprudence in the Federal Court of Australia and contrasting understandings of saltwater and freshwater perspectives, Professor Heathcote challenged the dominant conceptions of property and law, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of human–water interactions and the custodial relationship indigenous peoples have with water. Settler-colonial legal frameworks governing human–nonhuman relations are at odds with the stipulations of ‘terraqueous’ (land–sea) encounters known to the indigenous peoples.

The paper thus moved the confines of law to think justice and water–human relations whilst listening to such knowledge (or, listening to lore to critically rethink law). In the same week as our conference, Professor Heathcote noted, the First

Peoples in Australia held 'Land, Sky and Water Hearings' to gather evidence on systemic injustices against the interwoven land, sky, and water realms of the traditional custodians. They point to the disruption of knowledge through genocide. Since the early 1980s, legal cases in the country have recognised some maritime regions as native through land title. These cases have expanded the notion of evidence in court, for example to include traditional songs. Yet, Professor Heathcote argued, current legal systems relating to water management and governance are at odds with the indigenous custodial relation to water, based on human obligation to the nonhuman.

Learning from the long duration of water beings

Professor [Veronica Strang](#) delivered a thought-provoking keynote on the transformational potential of water beings in human–nonhuman relations, urging a reconsideration of contemporary power dynamics and human engagement with water. Professor Strang's address, titled *Divine Alternatives* delved into the historical and cultural significance of water deities across various societies, tracing their evolution and impact on human–environmental interactions. She highlighted the shift from nature worship prevalent in early human societies to the anthropomorphisation and displacement of water deities in larger, monotheistic societies.

Through a comparative study of water beings, Professor Strang revealed a pattern of religious transformation reflecting societal inequalities and the dominance of human-centric and androcentric ideologies. The shift towards agriculture and domestication opened the path not only to property control, increasing hierarchies, centralised states, and powerful male elites, but also to large irrigation schemes and control over nonhuman beings and the environment. Professor Strang traced this evolution of power through the rearticulation of water beings, their characteristics, and roles. Despite this, she argued that water divinities offer an alternative perspective that challenges existing power structures and encourages re-evaluation of human relationships with water and ecosystems.

Following water beings towards a new kind of intimacy with the River Cam

The talk was followed by an engaging discussion with Professor Strang about water beings around the world and her significant contributions to understanding human–environmental dynamics, particularly concerning water. Later, select participants went on a guided punting trip down the river Cam, as many of the panel conversations—about water beings, purity and pollution, water companies and trust, sacred rivers as pilgrimage, and others—turned to Cambridge as a locality with intimate, long duration water–human relations.

The Cambridge water project

The second day started with a panel, chaired by Dr [Iona C. Hine](#), which offered an in-depth exploration of the intricate relationship between religion, community engagement, and water sustainability. Central to the panel was [Water and/in religious relations: a Cambridge study](#), the report written by Dr [Anastasia R. Badder](#) as part of the Ofwat Innovation Fund project on [Water Efficiency in Faith and Diverse Communities](#). Dr Badder presented the insights gained from ethnographic research conducted within Cambridge's Muslim and Jewish communities. She emphasised the need for water management strategies to be informed by and sensitive to diverse cultural and religious perspectives, as well as the critical need for water industry actors to collaborate with those most impacted by their work. Dr Badder's argument underscored the potential of religious teachings to inspire sustainable behaviours and practices, challenging conventional approaches that often overlook this aspect.

[Mumin Islam](#), the main architect of the Ofwat-funded project, contributed to the discussion by highlighting the challenges faced in integrating religious values into workplace practices within the water industry. Drawing from his own experiences, Islam emphasised the importance of recognising and leveraging the intrinsic connection between religious teachings and environmental stewardship. He argued that by incorporating religious values into water management initiatives, companies can foster greater engagement and cooperation among employees and communities, thereby facilitating more effective and sustainable solutions.

Professor [Ian Barker](#) from the Institute of Water (and attending partly in his capacity as a Board member for Cambridge and South Staffs Water) echoed the sentiments expressed by Dr Badder and Islam, emphasising the transformative potential of integrating religious perspectives into water management practices. He commended Dr Badder's report for illuminating previously overlooked communities and advocated for a paradigm shift in how water companies approach community engagement. Dr Badder has shown us, he said, a more empathetic way to approach people. Professor Barker underscored the importance of building trust and empathy between water utilities and consumers, emphasising the need for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to address water wastage and promote sustainability.

Islam noted that, although there are numerous organisations and collaborative groups now trying to address these questions, it is important not to forget smaller communities. We need to do more in working collaboratively with communities—we need to listen, engage, learn new forms of communicating. Dr Badder agreed and noted that community collaboration should mean first and foremost learning from communities.

The panel's discussion extended beyond the immediate context of Cambridge, touching on broader issues such as the global impact of water consumption and

the imperative of equitable access to water resources. The conference participants asked how water companies might bridge the gap between the fact that domestic water is a small part of the problem and the fact that irrigation and extraction industries are much bigger problems relating to patterns of consumption. They also raised the question of trust between utility companies and consumers across the UK. The panellists agreed that trust is one of the central questions, which the water industry has not handled particularly well so far. They collectively underscored the critical role of religious beliefs in shaping attitudes towards water and highlighted the necessity of incorporating diverse perspectives into water management strategies for a more sustainable future.

Engaging scriptural waters

A Scriptural Reasoning workshop, facilitated by Dr [Giles Waller](#), [Hina Khalid](#), and Dr [Tali Artman-Partock](#), provided participants with an interactive experience of reading and interpreting religious texts from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scriptures centred around the theme of water. The workshop invited attendees to explore short passages from each tradition and engage in group discussions to reflect on the significance of water within these texts.

Dr Waller emphasised the inclusive nature of Scriptural Reasoning, encouraging participants to engage with the texts regardless of their personal beliefs. Before separating into three discussion groups, the facilitators gave all the participants an example of the analysis. Hina Khalid introduced a passage from Surah 16 of the Quran (verses 10-18), a surah known as The Bee, highlighting the multifaceted portrayal of water as both a valuable resource and a manifestation of divine providence within nature. Dr Artman-Partock responded by drawing attention to the celestial imagery associated with water in the Quran, prompting reflection on its symbolic significance and connection to life. Dr Waller reflected on the meaning of signs in the surah and the description of fresh water as connected to paths, with direction that guides human beings.

Then, divided into three groups, participants respectively discussed this Qur'anic surah, the Samaritan Woman at the Well narrative from the Gospel of John (John 4:4–15), and The Waters of Meribah (Numbers 20: 2–13) from the Hebrew Bible. Overall, the Scriptural Reasoning workshop provided a thought-provoking platform for participants to delve into the rich symbolism and theological interpretations of water across different religious texts, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among attendees.

Religion, Ecology, Activism

The Voices from Cambridge panel, chaired by Dr [Anastasia R. Badder](#), effectively united a diverse group of local researchers, practitioners, and activists to delve into the intricate relationship between faith and water. This interdisciplinary gathering aimed not only to explore the religious significance of water but also to advocate for collaborative efforts towards sustainable water practices.

[Meg Clarke](#), whose background includes a deep connection to nature as a meditator, grower, and wild swimmer, passionately addressed the issue of local water quality, particularly in the Cam. As a co-director of Water Sensitive Cambridge, Clarke emphasised the transformative potential of water experiences and the urgent need for community-driven initiatives to protect and restore water sources. Her intervention resonated strongly with her intimate relations with and extensive experience in advocating for nature and natural systems.

[Tilak Parekh](#), drawing from his research on Hindu rituals and sacred spaces, offered profound insights into the symbolic significance of water within Hinduism. By focusing on BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, popularly known as the 'Neasden Temple', he underscored the deeply ingrained cultural and spiritual dimensions of water in religious practices. Drawing on Sanskrit texts and religious rituals, he elucidated water's multifaceted role. He highlighted the reverence attached to water, emphasising its association with cleanliness, purity, and sacredness. Throughout various life stages, from birth to death, water rituals play a pivotal role in Hindu traditions, symbolising purification, unity, and spiritual significance. These rituals range from the pouring of holy water into a new-born's mouth to the symbolic act of washing the bride and groom's feet during marriage ceremonies. Moreover, water is central to Hindu festivals, for example when coloured water is used to express joy and celebration. The etymology of the word 'Hinduism' itself, derived from a river, underscores the intrinsic connection between Hindu culture and water. Parekh also mentioned the invocation of sacred rivers during water-related activities, reflecting the deep spiritual reverence for water within Hindu traditions. After death, a small amount of water from the Ganges may be poured into the mouth of the deceased, and their ashes are often offered to the river. In the UK, the River Thames is increasingly used in Hindu funerary rites. Overall, Parekh's talk provided a rich exploration of the diverse rituals and symbolism associated with water in Hinduism, shedding light on its profound spiritual and cultural significance.

Professor [Tony Booth](#), an environmental activist, brought attention to the pressing environmental challenges facing the river Cam. Professor Booth's lifelong dedication to values-led educational development and inclusion informed his impassioned plea for recognising the river's rights and advocating for sustainable water management practices. He posed critical and challenging questions around the ways particular water-human relations run through and shape wellbeings, economies, and possibilities for future worlds, and the practical implications of those different relations. His commitment to environmental sustainability was evident in his leadership role within Friends of the River Cam and his organisation of a festival to call for the river's rights.

[James Murray White](#), an environmental activist with a passion for storytelling through filmmaking, shared personal reflections on the impact of pollution on local chalk streams. Through his work as a writer, filmmaker, and activist, James eloquently conveyed the urgency of raising awareness about environmental issues and promoting community engagement in conservation efforts. His experiences

growing up in a South Cambridgeshire village gave a poignant backdrop to his advocacy for preserving water ecosystems for future generations.

Overall, the Voices from Cambridge panel exemplified the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, local perspectives, and grassroots activism in addressing complex environmental challenges. By weaving together personal experiences, academic expertise, and advocacy efforts, the panellists offered a compelling call to action for sustainable water stewardship grounded in faith, community engagement, and environmental justice.

Book panel: Water's stories

In the penultimate conference panel, participants mentioned some impactful and important written publications on water, but also suggested more attention to musical and other artistic forms of thinking about water, which often relate what text finds difficult to express. Dr Badder presented Julie Cruikshank's ethnography *Do Glaciers Listen?*, the next book in the CIP Reading Group on Religion and Ecology, noting the importance of listening to stories and understanding the more-than-human entanglements that challenge the dominant separation of human and nonhuman domains. Dr HadžiMuhamedović turned to Professor Veronica Strang's *Water Beings*, arguing that it is remarkable for telling an immense story (perhaps the biggest story ever told) as a Foucauldian 'history of the present', a history that is told as a diagnostic of the contemporary degradation of water to a resource. Participants have agreed to continue exchanging important texts on the water-religion nexus in the future.

Closing session: What next?

In the final session, Dr Iona Hine and Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović asked participants to suggest directions and collaborations as a follow-up to the conference. Non-presenting delegates had a chance to introduce their fascinating water-related activism, art, and research, which clearly suggested future iterations of the event, expanding the theme and the list of partners. Dr HadžiMuhamedović and Dr Badder discussed the possibility of an edited special journal issue.

Overall, participants agreed that the conference provided a platform for meaningful engagement and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, fostering a deeper understanding of the intersections between religion, ecology, and water sustainability. Attendees unanimously agreed that the papers, discussions, and workshops offered invaluable insights and identified avenues for future research and action.

Key takeaways

Several key lessons emerged:

1. There is a pressing need for interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive approaches to water governance that incorporate diverse cultural and religious perspectives.
2. Building trust and empathy between stakeholders is essential for fostering greater engagement and cooperation in addressing water challenges.

3. Grassroots activism and community-driven initiatives play a crucial role in promoting sustainable water practices and environmental stewardship.
4. Finally, recognising the relational nature of water and its intrinsic value beyond mere resource extraction is fundamental to reshaping human–water relations in a more sustainable direction.

In conclusion, the conference provided a valuable platform for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, highlighting the profound significance of water in human culture and the urgent need for collective action to ensure water security and sustainability for future generations. Attendees departed with a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between religion, water, and sustainability, as well as a renewed commitment to advancing innovative solutions and practices in water governance and management.

The conference was hosted at the University of Cambridge (Faculty of Divinity) and funded by the Ofwat Innovation Fund as part of the project, Water efficiency in faith and diverse communities. The overall project is led by South Staffordshire Water (also the water suppliers in the Cambridge area, trading locally as Cambridge Water). Partners include Waterwise, Severn Trent Water, South West Water, Affinity Water, Southern Water, Northumbrian Water, Get Water Fit, Hindu Climate Action, Eco Dharma Network, and Cambridge Central Mosque.

Further information is available on the Cambridge Interfaith Programme website: www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/water-efficiency