Everyone relies on water – whether they live in the bustling centre of a capital city, or a remote village on the edge of a desert. Across the world, we all use water for drinking, cooking, washing, farming and keeping our homes and environments clean.

Water also plays an important role in religion: from personal hygiene and cleanliness to rituals involving water; pilgrimages to visit holy rivers to stories about water from religious texts. Water is considered sacred in all the major religions.

Classroom activity ideas

• **Hot seating**: Students are given one of the religions on the resource sheet. They must read this through and remember as much as they can. They will then take it in turns to come up to the front of the class whilst the rest of the students ask them questions about the religion and its connection to water.

• **Just a minute**: Students are given one of the religions on the resource sheet. They must read this through and remember as much as they can. They must then come to the front and talk for one minute about the topic, without pausing, hesitating or getting any information wrong. The person that talks for the longest about their topic wins!

• **Classroom walkabout**: Print off each resource and stick it around the room on A3 paper. Students walk around the room and collect information from each resource in a table provided.

Clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene are basic human rights. They should be a normal part of daily life for everyone, everywhere – but they aren’t. Around the world, **771 million people are living without clean water and 1.7 billion people without a decent toilet**.

That’s why WaterAid works with local partners and communities in 28 countries, bringing clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene to communities around the world, and with it, giving people the power to change their own lives.
Water and rituals

- Some Thai Buddhists have ceremonial uses of water. Water is purified by monks reciting specific chants. This holy water is used in blessings for birthdays, anniversaries and marriage ceremonies.

- To mark new year in Cambodia, Buddhist communities gather to bathe elderly parents or grandparents using water, soap, perfume and flowers. They perform this ritual to apologise for mistakes made in the previous year, receive blessings and to bless their elders with long life. It is believed the clean water will wash the bad deeds away and bring happiness and prosperity.

- In Vajrayana Buddhism, seven bowls of water are offered to Buddha and other holy figures as a remedy for greed. Water is chosen as a symbol of purity, and because in many places it is plentiful, and does not require hurting others to give it.

Water and funerals

- Buddhists believe that after dying, the body returns to the four elements – earth, water, air and fire, while the soul reincarnates.

- In the days preceding the funeral, a ritual bathing ceremony is performed by family and friends, who repeatedly pour water over the hands of the deceased from a special flask or water pot.

- In Buddhist funerals water is often poured into an overflowing cup or bowl.

Word glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vajrayana</td>
<td>A unique form of Buddhism practiced mainly by Tibetians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four elements</td>
<td>Earth, water, air, fire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Registered charity numbers 288701 (England and Wales) and SC039479 (Scotland).
For Christians around the world, water plays a vital role in maintaining health and holiness. Water is associated not only with creation but also eternal life.

Water in the Bible

- In the Old Testament water is often presented as a gift from God.
- Rainfall can be a sign for God's favour and goodness. Droughts can be a sign of God's anger.
- In the New Testament water becomes a sign of rebirth in Jesus' baptism.

Water and rituals

- When water is blessed by a priest it becomes holy water. It can be used for baptism, for blessing people, places or objects, or for repelling evil.
- Holy water is kept in a font, often near the entrance to a church.
- Catholic believers will often dip their fingers in holy water as they enter a church, as a reminder of baptism.
- In the Middle Ages, holy water was seen as so powerful that some fonts had locked covers to prevent theft.

Water and pilgrimage

- Every year, millions of Christian pilgrims (particularly Roman Catholics) visit Lourdes in southwestern France.
- It is believed that spring water from the grotto can heal people if they are sick.
- Millions of visitors come to Lourdes each year in the hope of being cured.

“Emmeline was christened in a Roman Catholic church. In the Catholic faith the tradition should be performed as soon as possible. Emmeline was christened when she was 4 months old. Baptism is one of the seven sacraments, meant to absolve newborn babies of original sin. At the christening Emmeline was blessed by a priest and had holy water poured on her head with parents, godparents, and the wider family present.” Marisa, 37, mum to Emmeline

Word glossary

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>A collection of religious texts, sacred in Christianity, Judaism and many other faiths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>A place of worship for Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptism</td>
<td>The ceremony where holy water is used to welcome someone into the Christian church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Font</td>
<td>Where holy water is often kept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Water in Hinduism

Water has special significance for Hindus for its life-sustaining properties, its use in rituals, and because cleanliness is believed to be very important.

Water and cleanliness

- Taking a bath is an important daily ritual in the Hindu faith. It’s believed that bathing cleans the body but also the mind and soul.
- Bathing in the morning is thought to help remove all negative energy, and 4am is considered the most auspicious time.
- Many Hindu temples have public water tanks so that worshippers can bathe before entering the temple.

Sacred water

- Rivers play an important role in the Hindu faith. Many are believed to be sacred, and people bathe in them to cleanse themselves of their sins.
- There are seven principle holy rivers: Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu/Indus, Kaveri
- Ganga (the Ganges) is the holiest of the sacred rivers.
- Most rivers are considered female and are personified as goddesses. Ganga is usually shown riding on a crocodile, and Yamuna rides on a turtle.

Water and rituals

- Bhakti is where Hindus offer water, flowers or incense to a statue or picture of a god, believing it will take them from the material to the spiritual world.
- Believers will often make offerings of flowers and petals to sacred rivers, and float shallow clay dishes filled with oil and lit with wicks.
- Believers will often take small quantities of river water back home for use in rituals.

Water and pilgrimage: the Kumbh Mela

This major pilgrimage and festival is held on the banks of four alternating sites of the river Ganga. Every year, millions of Hindus take a dip in the river Ganga during the holy days of the Kumbh Mela, to cleanse their sins and atone for their mistakes.

Thirteen monks bathe first, accompanied by a celebratory march with horses, elephants, musicians, flags and banners, after which the festival opens for pilgrims to bathe.

The Kumbh Mela is the largest human gathering in the world!

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ganga</td>
<td>The Ganges – the holiest river for Hindus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhakti</td>
<td>Showing devotion to a god, often by making an offering of water, flowers or incense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumbh Mela</td>
<td>The major Hindu pilgrimage and festival held on the banks of the river Ganges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Islam, water is believed to be a blessing from Allah that gives and sustains all life in the world. Muslims believe that water is pure like God, and through water they are able to renew their togetherness with God. Water is mentioned in the Qur’an hundreds of times.

**Water and cleanliness**
- Personal *hygiene* and *cleanliness* are very important in Islam.
- Muslims are required to wash their **hands** before and after meals and to wash their **clothes** to purify them.
- Even at **death**, cleanliness is vital – a body is washed with water before being laid to rest.

**Water and prayer**
- Muslims pray **five times a day** and must be **clean to pray**.
- To **prepare for prayer** Muslims perform **wudu** – **ritual washing** which starts with the hands, then the mouth, nose and face, then arms, head, ears and feet.
- In **mosques** water is provided for believers to clean themselves before prayer. Mosques are often planned with water sources nearby, and fountains are common in old mosques.

“**Without water, your way of praying is not proper. When there is water you have to perform a ritual, to wash yourself before you go to the mosque to pray. Water is very important, it plays a significant role for everyone who prays to God because God loves cleanliness. There is no other thing to make you clean except for water.**”

Ibrahim Vandi, Imam in Tombohuaun Village, Sierra Leone

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<tr>
<td>Mosque</td>
<td>A place of worship for Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qur’an</td>
<td>The holy book of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wudu</td>
<td>Ritual washing before prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamzam Well</td>
<td>The holiest place in Islam and a major pilgrimage site in Mecca, where the water was miraculously generated by Allah thousands of years ago.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Registered charity numbers 288701 (England and Wales) and SC039479 (Scotland).
Water in Judaism

Handwashing and hygiene are a particular focus in Jewish law. Hands must be washed after waking up, before eating bread, after a meal, before worship and after leaving a cemetery.

Schoolchildren must be clean to study the sacred texts.

Water and the birth of Israel

• Within Judaism, Israel is the Holy Land, and the place where the faith began. Israel’s birth is closely linked with water.

• God parted the Red sea and the Israelites walked safely to dry land on their exodus from Egypt, while the Egyptians drowned as the sea came together again.

• In this story, water is an instrument of God – for blessing and punishment.

Water and rituals: the mikveh

• A mikveh is a Jewish traditional bath used to restore purity.

• Often found in synagogues, the bath is a pool of natural water, where believers submerge their whole body while reciting a prayer. The water in the pool must arrive from a natural source of water, untouched by human hands.

• The mikveh is used for cleansing after menstruation or contact with a dead body. It is also used as part of the initiation ceremony for converts to Judaism, for women to use before their wedding, and after childbirth.

• The mikveh originated in ancient times, when people had to be purified before they could enter the Temple area.

• The word mikveh contains the same root as the word used in the Book of Genesis to describe how God brought the waters together to create oceans and land.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synagogue</td>
<td>A Jewish house of worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikveh</td>
<td>Traditional Jewish bath used to restore purity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple</td>
<td>An ancient Jewish place of worship on the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are six different words for rain in Hebrew, which shows how closely people watched and studied the rains in ancient times.
Sacred waters: the sarovar

- A sarovar is the **sacred water near a gurdwara** (a Sikh temple). The sarovar may be:
  - A square or rectangular open pool with steps descending into the water
  - A moat-like structure completely or partially surrounding the gurdwara fed from a river or other water source
  - A covered tank or well beneath the ground
  - A fountain and pool
  - A trough.
- Many sarovars were **originally built for practical purposes** – so there was fresh water for cooking and bathing.
- Nowadays sarovars are **mainly used by pilgrims** for washing their feet, and performing isnaan.
- The waters in some sarovars are thought to have **curing powers**, because prayers are continually recited in the vicinity.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isnaan</td>
<td>The act of washing one’s body and soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amrit Sanskar</td>
<td>Sikh baptism ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amrit</td>
<td>A mixture of sugar and water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurdwara</td>
<td>A Sikh temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarovar</td>
<td>The sacred water near a gurdwara</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>