



The Water of Baptism, The Water of Life

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Water is basic human right, a survival need, and much more. As Christians, we commit ourselves through the water of baptism to resist evil and affirm new life in Christ as well as our responsibilities to the whole human community, which, in practice, must include the ecological integrity of the web of life. Water symbolizes the possibility of rebirth, empowerment, and the hope of a renewed creation. Water is a primordial manifestation of the sacred on earth. The sacred is about survival -- real survival for the whole body of life, which is the reason religious traditions, especially those of indigenous peoples, have valued it so highly. The substance of water itself, the natural design of watersheds, the ocean currents, and the cycles of rainfall express this spiritual meaning through their ecological properties of cleansing and healing the planet as a whole. Yet, we continue to destroy watersheds, bleach coral reefs, and over fish the oceans, while poisoning what remains of a well that is running dry.

The global scarcity and condition of freshwater and sanitation must be seen with the deepest possible concern. Projections indicate that nearly forty percent of the world's people will suffer from severe water scarcity within a decade. Water has been identified by the United Nations as one of five interrelated focus areas (WEHAB) for sustainable development (with energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity). Improvements in the condition of water and sanitation had a prominent place in the deliberations of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and its plan for action known as "Agenda 21," and more recently at the Millennium Summit (2002) in New York and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (August, 2002). The current goal agreed upon by the world's nations at the UN is to halve the number of people without safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015. But now, according to the World Water Report, that goal is already well beyond reach.

It is apparent that we have entered, headlong, the crisis that we had hoped decades of international policymaking would help us avoid. Evidence relating to energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity, in combination with low financial investment in sustainable development projects, points to the same conclusion. If present trends continue, then several future generations will be born before sufficient freshwater will be available to the majority of the world's people, and possibly not even then -- which

amounts to planning for seven generations by default, their inheritance passed on in the form of salvageable remains. Do we not know what an emergency alarm sounds like?

A great deal of attention internationally has been given to water pollution and scarcity over the last decade and much hopeful work is being accomplished in all areas of sustainable development and environmental protection, this cannot balance the death and despair for increasing numbers of people without food and safe water, or any water. The water crisis is worsening, yet the crossroads before us today is not one of choosing hope or pessimism in the face of an overwhelming challenge. Nor does it compromise our strong commitment to the vision and aims of the United Nations. It is more urgent than ever that we learn the lessons of the past and examine more closely what we are doing now in the awareness of the ecological reality of the present time.

From the standpoint of the United Nations, and particularly in the context of water, the Dublin Principles of the 1992 International Conference on Water and the Environment seem just as promising and problematic as they did a decade ago: (1) "freshwater is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life ..."; (2) "water development and management should be based on a participatory approach ... at all levels"; (3) "women play a central part in provision, management, and safeguarding of water"; (4), "water has an economic value ... and should be recognized as an economic good." The phrasing "essential to sustain life," which implies that water is a basic prerequisite of the healthy functioning of all ecosystems, actually understates its significance. The fourth principle, concerning water's economic value, has opened the door to privatization and commoditization, as well as corruption in potential markets, which marginalizes the voices of women and whole communities in most of the world.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a powerful tool for declaring, maintaining, and ensuring the fundamental right to water, which must be pursued more forcefully. Yet the fact that this must be done suggests that our commonsense has been muddled by factors outside normal practical and moral reasoning. Obviously, water is "essential to sustain life." Without it, life would not exist. The same can be said for healthy food and breathable air. The extent to which water must be claimed as a

fundamental right (even more a “need”) is the measure of how much that birthright has already been lost and our ecological and spiritual understanding diminished. The extent to which we believe this fundamental right can be genuinely gained on the basis of water’s economic value is the measure of how much our birthright has, in effect, already been given / taken away. Clearly, something is missing in the prevailing model of sustainable development.

The issues of privatization, the large-scale ownership of water, and more broadly, water as “an economic good,” have for some time been highly contentious subjects on the international scene. Private industry has tremendous resources which can help solve the water crisis. However, the solutions we seek must be understood in humanitarian, ecological, spiritual, as well as economic contexts. It is no secret that a large part of the crisis we have entered is a result of the rejection of sustainability, equity, the universality of human rights, and the common good by powerful economic interests who favor competition to decide who will win and lose in wars for dwindling resources. One must wonder if this colonial strategy informed the thinking of the so-called “Brussels group,” which included the United States, Britain, Germany, Belgium, Italy, France, and the Netherlands. As reported by the New Scientist and later by Huey Johnson of the Resource Renewal Institute in the UN Chronicle (2002), representatives of the Brussels group met secretly in 1971 to undermine the first Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. And today, we look ahead only a decade to for see nearly half the world’s people without sufficient water!

People like Rene Dubos and Barbara Ward -- to name only two of many from the time when the UN first took up the ecological crisis -- knew that we need to reconsider our economic values. They also recognized that the present crisis will not be solved simply by directing more finances to specific problem areas, as urgently as they are needed. Economic growth can no longer be seen as the only measure of development. To continue down that road will ensure that water will become a commodity, rather than a right and an outward of the sacramental nature of life. To marginalize the majority of the world’s people from decisions about the ownership of water and access to it also marginalizes us from the most fundamental decisions of life, livelihood, and basic spiritual values. Clearly we must redouble our efforts

to apply commonsense, instead of elevating greed as the predominant organizing principle in our common life. Moreover, the sacred and the ecological are so bound together in the web of life that their separation in our consciousness is the seed of exploitation and colonial domination, regardless of the outward form it may take. Thomas Berry, whose prophetic voice weaves seamlessly with profound commonsense, recently described the outcome of this exploitation by saying that we are changing the chemistry of the biosphere. It is simply not enough to believe that this fact will affect our lives sometime in the future. The chemistry of our bodies is changing with the earth’s now -- of course, it always has because the earth’s body, our bodies, and Christ’s body are all interconnected.

As this happens, policymakers focus their attention on the need to regulate the water industry and its markets, which could be helpful, but does little to address the real questions.

* What does it mean when water is so scarce that our primary symbol of renewal is no longer available?

* What does it mean when water is so contaminated, i.e., poisoned, that its primordial capacity to heal has been lost?

*What kind of empowerment is proclaimed when the water of baptism must be purchased from those who “own” it?

The deteriorating condition of freshwater across the planet threatens the integrity of religious life as a whole and erodes our ability to meet other crises in the present and future. It is critical that we, as faithful Christians, rethink the priorities and problems in sustainable development strategies concerning water - - as well as energy, food, health, and biodiversity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be strengthened in this regard by the collective voices and actions of all parties. As NGOs representing the world’s religions, we must organize ourselves again, at all levels, in the spirit of the World Parliament of Religions and the Assisi Declarations, and take action. There is nothing to lose that hasn’t already been lost, or threatens to be, and everything to gain.



Faacts About Water

- Of the total volume of water on earth, 97% is seawater, 2% is frozen in polar caps, and 1% is underground, in lakes, and in rivers.
- Today, 230 million people in 26 countries live in scarce water conditions.
- The average resident of the United States uses 70 times more water than a person in Ghana.
- Two thirds of China's cities today are short of water.
- Seawater is currently entering Israel's freshwater supplies. It is expected that 50% of its freshwater wells will be too salty for agriculture by the year 2020.
- Since 1990, 40 species of American fish have become extinct.
- Global water usage has tripled since 1950.
- An average of 170 dams are built each year around the world, although is less than half of those built at mid-century.
- One-third of the people n the developing world today (roughly 1.2 billion) do not have safe water for everyday use.

Suggested Reading

- Berry, Thomas (1988) *The Dream of the Earth*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.
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- Roszak, Theodore (1992) *The Voice of the Earth*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
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