



Water Conflicts and Spiritual Transformation: A Dialogue

Working Group



While press reports of international waters often focus on conflict, what has been more encouraging is that, throughout the world, water also induces cooperation, even in particularly hostile basins, and even as disputes rage over other issues. This has been true from the Jordan (Arabs and Israelis) to the Indus (Indians and Pakistanis) to the Kura-Araks (Georgians, Armenians, and Azeris). Despite research that finds repeatedly and empirically that water-related cooperation overwhelms conflict over the last fifty years, prevailing theories fail to explain this phenomenon. Certainly, there is a long history of conflicts over, or related to, shared freshwater resources. But there is also a long, and in many ways deeper, history of water-related cooperation. Why do countries that share a basin cooperate on water, even when they will not cooperate over other issues? Here is a resource on which we all depend, which fluctuates wildly in space and time, and for which there is little guidance in international law. By any quantitative measure, water should be the most conflictive resources, not an elixir that drives enemies to craft functioning and resilient institutional arrangements.

Studies offer economic, environmental, or strategic rationale to explain this “hydro-cooperation,” but none seems completely adequate. Prevailing wisdom in both the science and policy of water resources seems not to provide the foundation to be able to answer this clearly ethical question. Perhaps some part of the answer lies not in the world of rationality, but rather in the ethical and spiritual dimensions of water conflict resolution.

Work Plan

The workshop will center on the process of transformation in negotiations – the point at which

parties move from thinking of themselves as representing countries, to perceiving more broadly the needs of all stakeholders within a basin. This is a critical juncture in negotiations, where movement from “rights-based” to “needs-based” to “interest-based” negotiations suddenly becomes possible. In international basins, this transformation may normally take years or even decades, during which time political tensions are exacerbated, ecosystems go unprotected, and water is generally managed, at best, inefficiently. This negotiation transformation may, however, have a corollary in spiritual transformation. Every spiritual tradition in the world is devoted to a very similar process: that is to get individuals to move from thinking about their needs as individuals – their immediate wants and desires – to addressing more of their obligations to society and humanity. The workshop will be structured as a dialog, then, between the worlds of spiritual transformation and water conflict prevention and resolution. Blocks of discussion time around critical questions, led off by the commissioned author of a thematic briefing, will center on questions of mutual concern: Might the world of spiritual transformation have tools or approaches that may be tapped to help bolster the difficult dynamics of international environmental negotiations? Could addressing the ethical core of negotiations supplement the only partially successful tactics of economic development or environmental protection? Does the rich record of successful water negotiations offer approaches to other complex political issues, many of which are rooted in religious differences? How do the world's religions address environmental protection, and how does global water management address spiritual needs of water stakeholders?

Details

The sponsoring institutions will hold a focused workshop on these issues on 13-15 October 2004 in Vatican City. This workshop will bring together 25 invited discussants familiar with international water issues, the international negotiations process, or the process of transformations in political or spiritual debate. Modeled after a highly successful meeting that brought together experts in international water issues and arms control negotiations, the expectation is that this workshop will help identify mechanisms for reducing the risks of conflicts over shared water resources, improve ongoing efforts around the world to negotiate over shared water resources, and develop new tools for conflict resolution.

Blocks of discussion time will center around critical questions, led off by a thematic briefing. Topics will be raised by the participants, but might include:

Might the world of spiritual transformation have tools or approaches that may be tapped to help bolster the difficult dynamics of international environmental negotiations?

Could addressing the ethical core of negotiations supplement the more common inducements to cooperate of economic development or environmental protection, which have shown only partial success?

Does the rich record of successful water negotiations offer approaches to other complex political issues, many of which are rooted in religious differences?

How do the world's religions address environmental protection, and how does global water management address spiritual needs of water stakeholders?

What does universality of water offer to applying faith-based principles in negotiations?

What does personal transformation offer to the process of watershed transformation;
How does personal faith impact decision-making; if greatly, can universal values be more explicitly invoked to facilitate negotiations?

Conference organizers and selected participants will present a series of papers on the topic at the Second Israel-Palestinian International Conference on Water for Life in the Middle East, to be held in Rome October 9-12, 2004. The Middle East, as a hub of spiritual traditions as diverse as Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and the Bahai faith, as well as the home of some of the world's most complex processes of water conflict resolution, is uniquely positioned to benefit from the work done at this meeting.

In addition, the findings will be published in various forms in appropriate outlets, including as a report of the Pacific Institute and Oregon State University, as journal or popular articles, and as recommendations for water mediators.

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