TROUBLED WATERS – Becoming ecologically awakened to the sacred earth and the implications for how we live

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1. Introduction: awakening to the earth

Each morning at home I wake to the sound of running water, sometimes bubbling along, some times simply flowing noiselessly. This is the River Test, a pure chalk stream coming from the hills and flowing into Southampton Water. Weeping willows bend their branches gracefully into the stream; numerous ducks, swans and pigeons delight in their watery home, and, in season, fish leap dramatically into the air. What is more, the waters never seem to run dry, even in a hot summer. We have a well – as do many cottages in the street - that descends deep, almost to river level, so are protected from the fear that we will suffer from the drought that threatens and is indeed the reality in many parts of the world. Water here is daily grace and, gift and beauty.

Cross to the southern hemisphere to the desert state of Rajasthan, NW India, and face the contrast. The scarcity of water cries out for a different symbolism. Rajasthan is the second poorest state in India and is the size of the British Isles. There are huge cultural contrasts here between the sumptuous palaces of the Maharajahs (now luxury hotels), the wealth of art, music and literary traditions – and then the shock of poverty and degradation, noticeable mostly in cities. But this derives from the unsustainability of life in the villages – where water scarcity is experienced at its most acute level. Almost 70% of Indians still live in villages. Nicholas Grey, (my husband) and I have been associated with this semi-desert state for 21 years, having founded the NGO Wells for India (WFI) in 1987. We have experienced over twenty years of searching for water, and developing with our partners water harvesting techniques to conserve monsoon water. Here I just give a few features of the social situation affected by water stress and lack of water security.

WFI tries to work in partnership with the government wherever possible, but there are many difficulties surrounding government initiatives, the fact that numerous remote villages are off the official map, that they are not revenue villages and therefore not qualifying for electricity, education, or, in fact, any facilities. Seasonal migration of any men fit for working when agriculture has failed means that women must run the villages. Many of Rajasthan’s 60 million people are tribal people, many belong to scheduled castes, others are Dalits (=former Untouchables) – thus are outside state benefit system, and despised by high caste people. In Rajasthan these are normally the Rajputs, or warrior caste. The norm is either drought or a water-stressed situation
– and with the worsening unpredictability of the climate, drought now alternates with flooding. For 5 years, up till 2003 there was a severe drought. Both our project areas (in the Thar Desert north of Jodhpur, and in the Aravali Hills south of Udaipur) were severely affected. But in 2006 flood damage swept away houses and killed livestock.

These factors coalesce in a dramatic way in the desperate position of women in Rajasthan. Never have I seen a situation where factors from tradition/religion/ caste-based poverty/patriarchy/effects of global capitalism and water stress coalesce to make the lives of women so trapped in degrading poverty and lives of suffering from birth to death.

As the government of Rajasthan itself says:
The status of women in Rajasthan is an international issue. Patriarchy, discriminatory customs and values, caste-based discrimination, high illiteracy and high rates of poverty seem pervasive. (Despite all efforts towards social justice, women) ... continue to be perceived as burdens.

Some significant features of women’s suffering are, first, the sex ratio: in some areas there are 910 women for every 1,000 males in the population – although in other areas, according to Action Aid, the ratio is far worse. Female infanticide is a serious issue, as well as anaemia, poor nutrition, maternal mortality, (558 per lakh), child deaths from poor nutrition and water-related diseases are all factors. 80% of all women of child-bearing age suffer from anaemia; infant deaths are 79/1000; the maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world. The State recognises that women and girl-children are caught in a cycle of malnutrition.

All this is closely related to the desperate search for water which is the responsibility of women. The daily struggle for water, fuel, minor forest produce, fodder for animals and a small daily wage in addition to endless household chores, maybe violence in the hands of a drunken husband, the fear of abuse or even rape, especially for Dalit women, strip women of self-esteem and dignity as human beings. Any solution has to begin with achieving water security and this we do through water-harvesting, harnessing the “ancient wisdom of the desert people” to trap and store monsoon water. Recently, the writer and commentator Mark Tully (based in Delhi) warned Wells for India, at a Conference in 2007 celebrating 20 years work, that unless we in the west act effectively in the context of climate change, India will not reduce her carbon footprint and will continue to back policies where the lives of the most vulnerable village people will continue to deteriorate.

Abundance of water, lack of water, water as gift, water as threat... but what does this mean on a more global level? Will an understanding of the facts about “troubled waters” lead us to a committed ethical response and evoke inspiration from key themes from our faith tradition(s)?


1.6 billion people now have no access to clean water.

2.5 billion have no sanitation (2008 is the Year of Sanitation).
Cities have special problems: 380 million people in Latin America (from 507 m) live in cities – up to 80% of the illnesses in these regions are due to contaminated water and untreated sewage.

3 million children die from dysentery every year – 6,000 a day from water-borne diseases like gastro-enteritis. 80% of diseases in the poor southern countries are water-related.

6 million children are affected by fluoride poisoning of water, (half of these are in Rajasthan, India). Excess amounts of fluoride affects not only teeth, but causes crippling and hunched backs. Rajasthan has been called “the bent zone”.

Over 2 million women in the US risk developing thyroid problems & having babies with birth defects, due to a rocket-fuel which has leaked into USA’s drinking water & food supply. v

In 1998, 28 countries experienced water stress or scarcity. This number is expected to rise to 56 by 2025. Three quarters of water-stressed countries are in the Third World. By 2032, 50% of the world will experience a shortage of clean water, and Asia will suffer a shortage of 90%. The report, Up in Smoke, (November 2007) states: In the summer of 2007, British aid agencies, including those in the Up in Smoke alliance, had to raise funds from the UK public to go towards assisting up to 28 million people affected by flooding in South Asia. Over half of the population of Asia live near the coast, making them directly vulnerable to sea-level rise driven by global warming. Asia is home to 87 per cent of the world’s known 400 million small farmers who are all especially vulnerable to climate change as they rely on regular and reliable rainfall. Drought in north China has increased, ruining the livelihoods of the region’s farmers. And, around 8 out of 10 glaciers in western China are reportedly in retreat due to climate change.

The latest global scientific consensus indicates that all of Asia is set to warm during this century, and that this will be accompanied by less predictable and more extreme patterns of rainfall. Tropical cyclones are projected to increase in magnitude and frequency across the region, while monsoons, around which farming systems are designed, are expected to become more unpredictable in their strength and time of onset.

Even in Bangladesh, which has over 80 ins of rain, there is a scarcity of drinkable water. 70% of Bangladesh is flooded. Deep wells are contaminated with arsenic -(1.5 million wells). 60% of the world’s population live in Asia, yet it receives only 36% of the world’s water.

Water conflicts will increasingly prove a major cause for war: – In Israel the Jewish population consumes 7 times as much water per capita as the Palestinians. There is controversy over water from the Jordan, as well as access to the western Aquifer system. Turkey has spent millions on dams on the Tigris/Euphrates rivers, forcing Syria and Iraq to curtail requirements. There are tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan in sharing the waters of the Indus rivers. The interlinking of river plans are another source of conflict: – What is the ethical principle to be invoked for water – use that prevents countries downstream from benefiting?
The ice cap is melting far faster than predicted. Sea levels equally are rising faster than predicted. “We live in an age of rising seas” said Rachel Carson, already in 1930!

Flooding and hurricane catastrophes especially in the developing world increase each year - which means that there are increasing numbers of environmental refugees. Yet, desertification also increases, especially in many Africa countries, as well as in Australia.

Fish stocks are exhausted in many seas and habitats endangered for marine creatures. (I think of the damaged coral reefs). One fifth of the world’s fish is already lost.

All these factors force the question to a deeper level, asking what are the underlying factors of the crisis. Some of the most important reasons include, first, the now universally recognised situation of climate change/global warming – much of it anthropogenically caused. Closely on its heels and also a contributory factor to climate change is the global economic system of globalisation or, more specifically, unregulated global capitalism, fostering unequal power relations within and between countries, both rich and poor. Global capitalism itself spawns patterns of industrial production and intensive agriculture requiring large amounts of water for irrigation as well as the growing of water-hungry crops in semi-desert regions. “Virtual” water – or the amount of water needed for the growing of vegetables and fruit to be marketed in other parts of the world - is hardly ever factored into the calculation of water consumption.

This factor is part of (in general) poorly conceived development policies - like large dam schemes – linked with misguided water management. These in turn are responsible for salination on a massive scale. (De-salination schemes do exist, but are usually beyond the budget of poor countries). No factor stands more central to the global capitalist, profit-oriented economic system than the privatisation of water: 10 major corporations are now delivering fresh water services for profit. The 3 largest - Suez and Vivendi Environment of France and RWE-AG of Germany deliver water to almost 300 million customers in over a hundred companies. They are in a race with others to expand to every corner of the globe. Poor countries are encouraged by the IMF and World Bank to privatisate water systems in order to qualify for loans. If the poor cannot pay they are simply disconnected!

Water lords are always on the hunt for more lucrative undiscovered water sources. In the process of privatisation there is much exploitation of precious water sources, for example, the exploitation by corporations of water supplies such as the scandal over the Coca Cola factory in Kerala. Even the sacred waters of the Ganges are not safe from privatisation! The search for ever-increasing profit has also brought deforestation on a massive scale, itself a contributory factor to increasing desertification.

The global nature of the economic system also encourages international tourism. Whereas there are positive features of travel, the demands on local resources are unsustainable: hotels/cruise liners with showers, swimming pools need water on a scale that local water sources cannot match. Such is the life-style of contemporary consumer society, with a population growth that the earth cannot sustain - that rests on unsustainable patterns of water consumption, and a culpable neglect in the face of
waste and pollution of water – including over-reliance on groundwater aquifers. Much of this water pollution is irreversible. But crying out for attention over and above all these factors is the loss of the sense of sacredness of water and other fundamental resources of the earth.

3. Lack of water is a threat to life: - the case of Palestine

Having no water or polluted water infringes the most basic of human rights and this is the misery suffered each day on the West Bank of Palestine. Shortage of water affects every function that water plays in human life: drinking, washing, cleaning, and watering of crops and animals. It has drastic affects on health and economic well-being. Shortage of drinking water can cause dehydration and the inability to maintain proper hygiene and thus lead to illness. Failure to water crops and animals affects the livelihood of the residents. This is a situation where the average Israeli consumes six times as much water as the average West Bank Palestinian resident. Hospitals suffer acutely.

Some two hundred thousand Palestinians living in 218 West Bank villages are not connected to a water network, and therefore have no running water. In this severe water crisis people are unable to meet their basic water needs, including basic hygiene, house cleaning and using the toilet. As I write - January 1st 2009 – the conflict in Gaza is escalating: the Gazan people have access to water on average for only 2 hours a day. Even before this latest outbreak of violence no one can have failed to see Gaza’s suffering, as water and sewage systems failed, and people’s hunger was only coped with by humanitarian supplies: even these were reliant on Israel’s permission. And this was within a state of supposed truce between Gaza and Israel.

Yet the restrictions on movement imposed by the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) since the beginning of the intifada already aggravated the crisis and make it difficult for water tankers to transport water to the needy communities. The source of the water shortage in the West Bank as a whole, and in villages without a water network in particular, derives mostly from two factors:
the extremely inequitable division of the water sources shared by Israel and the Palestinians
Israel's failure to invest in water infrastructure throughout the years of occupation and lack of implementation of the Oslo Agreement in 1995. This anguished situation in a long-drawn-out conflict mirrors scenes the world over: without water there is no life.

4. Waters of life and how we renew them.

Awareness is only a first step. To move from crisis to responsible water management it is not enough to tinker with a few measures; nothing less than the re-thinking of vital reference points is needed if the earth is to be sustainable for future generations. Any religious response is mindful, first, that though society provides a framework of market economy, God has created us within a gift economy. Water – along with air, trees, plants and animal life all of whom depend on water - is a gift; its life-creating, life-sustaining and healing potential is pure gift. The Australian Catholic Bishops knew this when they produced their prophetic document “The Gift of Water” based on the threatened waters of the Murray-Darling basin. Pope John Paul II showed awareness when he called upon us to reconcile with the earth as a way of making peace. (World Peace Day 1990). The Bishops of the Orthodox Church who undertook a sea voyage in the ship, “Festos Palace” in June 2002, showed their awareness in pronouncing water pollution to be a sin.

Secondly, society as a whole - not only so-called “religious people” - needs to recover the sense of the sacredness of water within this gift economy. Water is the link between our longing for God and for the fullness of life and flourishing of the entire creation. But we can only recover this sense of the sacred by living within an alternative world view that opposes the world view of the economy spawned by global capitalism, a world view that reduces earth and all who inhabit her to fodder for profit making.

The world view I propose in order to recover the sense of sacredness and inspire a different ethics is based on this giftedness, seen as interconnectedness of the entire web of life. ixTwo foundations underpin it - evolutionary truth and a creation theology of the presence of God to the whole of creation. I have worked on interconnectedness as a metaphor for a theology inspiring justice and peace for many years, specifically as regards creation with my book The Wisdom of Fools? where the Holy Fool constantly interrogates Logos, the representative of a profit-dominated economy and Sophia, the representative of an alternative world view based on interconnectedness and wisdom.x

This world view, since it is based on ecological truth and the spiritual reality of the immanence of the Holy Spirit in creation, has a powerful potential to inspire the recovery of the sacredness of creation, here specifically of water, so crucial to every form of life. The interdependence of all forms of life calls for an ascesis of self-limitation on the one hand, a simplicity of life-style, and compassion for other forms of life on the other, especially where they are suffering, their existence threatened.

Where theological traditions have frequently failed to keep at the forefront the world view of connectedness, poets and novelists have often given us glimpses. Here is how the Russian novelist Dostoevsky saw the threads of the entire universe held connected
in the human soul. It happens at a time of crisis for the hero, Alyosha, as his beloved mentor, Father Zossima, lies dying:

Alyosha did not stop on the steps, but went down rapidly. His soul, overflowing with rapture, was craving for freedom and unlimited space. The vault of heaven, studded with softly shining stars, stretched wide and vast over him...The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth seemed to merge into the silence of the heavens..Alyosha stood, gazed, and suddenly threw himself flat up on the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it....It was as though threads from all these innumerable worlds of God met all at once in his soul. He had fallen upon the earth a weak youth, but he rose from it a resolute fighter for the rest of his life, he realised it and felt it suddenly at the very moment of his rapture.

Within this visionary worldview of connectedness and interdependence, held together by God’s sustaining presence giving strength from the earth herself, it is possible to reclaim strengths from the different Christian faith traditions. Here specifically, Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic, mindful that many are shared by all and that there are others I do not mention.

**Protestantism: the call to conversion and renewed covenant:**

First, the many Protestant traditions offer us the centrality of conversion, and the call to covenant. Rosemary Ruether has called the greatest task of this new century and millennium, the need for reconversion to the earth. By conversion I mean a total metanoia, a turning of heart and mind to God, and God-in-creation. Recently many Anglican Church leaders – in England the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres - have called for repentance, denouncing pollution of the earth as sin, and ecological sin as a form of structural sin. Increasing numbers of people conclude that the way out of the crisis requires spiritual renewal: not just a change of habits, but a change of hearts - in Christian terms, repentance. Tragically, the environmental implications of our Christian Faith are so little understood, even among Christians, that the Church is often the last place most people look for spiritual solutions. Instead, they turn to the worship of Mother Earth, or indigenous religions, or witchcraft, or New Age spirituality. For the church to act effectively as prophetic community a total change of heart, a shaking of the foundations is a pre-requisite. Here is a missionary opportunity perhaps not paralleled since Saint Paul noticed the Athenians' altar to "the unknown god."

The second notion is covenant: it is often forgotten that the covenant between God and the Israelites included covenant with creation. Isaiah linked the healing of people with water springing up in the wilderness (Is.35, 65); the Jubilee laws (Levit.19) command respect for the needs and limits of the land within a vision of right relationship. This idea falls from sight during the life-time of Jesus where the focus is more on compassion and justice for people. (Maybe because the people were mostly landless?) But the covenant comes back with strength with the reformers Zwingli and Calvin, and is given prophetic interpretation by the radical Anabaptists. Movements like the Diggers, (Clapham Sect) in England in the 17th century embodied respect for the land within a wider programme of justice. But the real heart of covenant as cosmic dimension is being rediscovered in the current context of crisis. The concept acquire
more power from within a worldview of connectedness, as it offers a recognition of a fundamental truth, a repentance that offers a joy of embracing earth as gift instead of as commodity.

**Orthodoxy: the call to a Eucharistic ethos and an ascesis of gratitude**

What the Orthodox church offers is found pre-eminently in the liturgical, eucharistic and ascetic ethos of the Tradition. A eucharistic ethos means, writes Elizabeth Theokritoff, above all, using natural resources with thankfulness, offering them back to God – so incompatible with wastefulness. Similarly, fasting and other ascetic practices make us recognize even the simplest of foods and other creature comforts as gifts, provided to satisfy our needs. They are not ours to abuse and waste just so long as we can pay for them. We worship as a community, not as individuals; so a liturgical ethos is also one of sharing. Long before the earth was seen as a whole from space, the Church knew that we stand before God together, and that we hold in common the earthly blessings that He has given to mankind and all creatures. "Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs," as Saint John Chrysostom wrote. This principle, applied to the whole range of natural resources, is particularly relevant because the global environment is squeezed on two sides: by the over-consumption, greed and waste of the affluent, and by the pressing needs of the poor, often forced to deplete the land around them for the sake of food or fuel in the short term. Just sharing with other people does not only involve using less of finite resources but also precludes enjoying conveniences and luxuries for which others are having to pay the hidden environmental price, living with the toxins used in their manufacture and the pollution caused by their use and disposal.

This eucharistic ethos invites a reverence for matter - the world around us, other creatures, our own bodies. Flowing from a worldview of interconnectedness, it would be hard to miss this attitude in the worship of the Church, but, Elisabeth Theocritoff continues, it seems quite easy to combine it with contempt for matter in everything non-liturgical, even in Church. So, we bless water, and then drink it out of plastic cups destined straight for the landfill! The chasm between worship and life-style urgently needs to be addressed.

**Roman Catholicism and the sacramental economy**

Sacramentality is shared of course with Orthodoxy and other churches, but as it is linked here with a tradition of Social Justice encyclicals, (an under-used resource) a window is opened to links with ethics and social justice. Not that these documents represent a long tradition of valuing water and the earth, but because of a commitment to structural justice, and also because of the centrality of the idea of the Common Good – that flies in the face of the contemporary stress on the individual’s right to pursue his/her own happiness, regardless of environmental consequences - they provide a sharper challenge to the world view I am opposing. Today, the earth is the (vanishing) treasure we hold in common, and it is precisely the need for us to recover the notion of the earth’s good and specifically the preciousness of water, that is our focus.

What we find in shared Christian traditions is a sacramental poetics of water, inviting us to experience dimensions of sacrament far beyond ecclesial settings. A sacramental poetics is about transformation, the transforming of everyday perception
and experience into something that satisfies the deepest longings. Sacramental poetics is also a catechesis with educational potential to re-enchant a broken-hearted world, speaking the language and the music of the heart to the addicted consumer, the jaded, hypnotised slave of the market. Often where the language of church documents fails to motivate and inspire us, we look – as I hinted earlier- to the voices of poets, the language of music and art to nurture and nourish this waste-land of cultural brokenheartedness and prepare the ground for transformation. Thousands of “sacramental moments” are poured out in the daily realities of life - in bodily, gendered experience, frequently overlooked in the official definitions of sacrament. Listen to the voice of the poet, Mary Oliver:

*Every morning*
*The world*
*Is created.*
*Under the orange*

*Sticks of the sun*
*The heaped*
*Ashes of the night*
*Turn into leaves again.....*

*Each pond with its blazing lilies*
*Is a prayer heard and answered*
*Lavishly, every morning,*

*Whether or not*
*You have ever dared to be happy,*
*Whether or not*
*You have ever dared to pray.xvii*

The sacramental reverencing of water has ancient roots in history. In Britain it links with Celtic and pre-Christian awareness of the sacredness of water. Wherever the Celts have left traces of their settlements, this sacredness is unmistakeable. In the British Isles Atlantic rain-bearing winds swept the islands and sowed many thousands of wells venerated by the Druids for life-giving and magical properties.xviii Later, in the age of the Christian Celtic Saints, hardly a Church was without its holy well, and frequently the keeper of the well was a woman saint - xixSt Non, (mother of St David), St Winifred of N.Wales and St Brigid of Ireland - to whom thousands of wells were dedicated, being just a few examples. These saints point us backwards to goddess figures responsible for the holy waters as well as to contemporary stories. The cauldron of the British/Welsh goddess Ceridwen carries a double meaning of vessel of rebirth and enlightenment - as well as womb for the child who, according to one legend, who would become the poet Taliessin. Drinking from the cauldron or from the waters of the well is always enacting an initiation into wisdom. My own experience in Rajasthan – as I have tried to show - is of life being restored when water is flowing again in a village. This is the grace that is the possibility of flourishing, for women to hold their heads up, for a village to regain self esteem, for children to regain the energy of childhood. Longing for water is like longing for God, as the psalmist said. It is eros for life and it heals brokenheartedness.
Although now we live in times when the sacred wells are being rediscovered as sites of pilgrimage, often the inherent depth of meaning that might bring about change and transformation is left untapped. Each Church pilgrimage could begin at a local well, inviting a community to take responsibility for its water sources, waste and pollution.

**Drinking from the well is drinking from Christ’s wisdom**

Crucial for Christian symbolism in this connection is that one of the earliest symbols of Christ was the fish, seen in numerous paintings, although it is still disputed as to how much this originated in the Greek word ichthus, (Jesus -Christ - Son of God -Saviour), the significance of the disciples as “fishers of men” or Jesus’ cooking fish on the shore after the resurrection. What is sure is that the Christological connection between fish-water-wisdom is an old one. It is told of the Well of Conna in Ireland, an ancient well of knowledge, (either the source of the rivers Boyne or Shannon, or of the seven chief rivers of Ireland) that hazel trees of wisdom grew over it:

> The nuts fell into the river and the salmon ate them and so imbibed the wisdom.xx

Among the many legends surrounding this well is the idea of the salmon of wisdom, and Christ as salmon in Celtic spirituality. He has even been referred to as “the blessed curly violent salmon”, and “salmon of the three wells”.xxi There is a tradition that the salmon - or eel, or trout- inhabit the well, and if the pilgrim catches a glimpse, s/he might be healed.

The heart of the story still seems to be that drinking water is drinking deep of the wisdom of Christ. St Columbanus exhorts his followers to seek the fountain of life, “like intelligent and wise fish, that there we may drink the living water that springs to eternal life”.xxii And that takes us to another connection between thirst for knowledge, healing, being thirsty for water and thirsting for God.

A sacramental poetics cannot ignore the terrifying ambiguity of the natural world. In the Biblical account of the sinfulness of humankind before the Flood, it seems that sexual sin is the issue. Then how significant is it that the punishment comes in the form of excess of wateriness:

> all that is necessary to ruin the structure of his being (= Noah) is to infiltrate him with excess of water.xxiii

The very sophistication of our lives hides this basic truth of existence. Yet the Bible is redolent with imagery of fluidity, moistness, sensuousness - in a context where drought is more the norm, where desertification and struggle to make a living in harsh terrain are the reality. The Torah was given to Israel on a rocky height in the desert of Sinai. Moses striking the rock in a desperate search for water is at the heart of the wilderness story.

For the Christian story, water’s link with salvation is the heart of the sacrament of baptism and its transformation. If we look at the blessing of the water at the Easter Vigil, the retelling of the sacred story of renewal of creation, the drama par excellence of sacramental poetics, a vivid picture emerges. A dramatic history of water in salvation is told, from the dawn of creation to Resurrection. The drama is experienced
partly through the expectation of the Easter experience. It is night time. The mystery of the new fire of the rising Christ in the darkness has just been celebrated. The waters of Easter offer a “new birth of innocence by water and the spirit.” But it is the Easter candle, symbol of the Rising Christ, plunging into the font that is the most significant moment. Phallic though this ancient symbolism may appear, sun god impregnating mother earth, we can see it differently, not as the passive, receptive water that must be given some meaning, but as the joyous union of the Rising Jesus, the cosmic Jesus with the fertile promise of the watery depths of chaos. In this way the rhythm of light/darkness and oceanic depths is creatively restored and new possibilities opened up.

Hence the way of sacramental poetics is one way to the healing of a desolate culture, to the recovery of connectedness with the web of life, its promise and its limits. This is why Second Isaiah’s image of the “watered garden” is so significant. Here the ethical rejoins the poetic- if it ever should have been severed from it. In the context of the return of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity (535 BCE), the prophet once more struggles for the heart of the people. He recalls them to the core of the covenant with the poor: sharing food with the hungry and clothing the naked means

*Then shall your light break forth like the dawn and soon you will grow healthy like a wound newly-healed. (58.8)*

But more than this. The people’s needs and desires will be satisfied “in the shimmering heat”:

*you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. (58.11b)*

The connection is unmissable. Desires are satisfied because the people have remained faithful to the heart of the covenant, and in the burning heat, the dryness of the land, they are like a “watered garden,” flowing and cared for, fertile and flourishing. A sacramental poetics of water is about more than satisfying thirst and the politics of water, vital areas though these are. Longing for water is longing for God and for the justice and peace of healed creation.

Thirdly, I make the connection with eucharistic wisdom. Drinking pure well water, a symbol of drinking deep of the wisdom of Christ leads to a eucharistic vision. No one expressed this better than the Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin. It was the burning heart of his spirituality:

*The Eucharist must invade my life. My life must become, as a result of the sacrament, an unlimited and endless contact with you, that life which seemed, a few moments ago, like a baptism with you in the waters of the world, now reveals itself to me as communion with you throughout the world.*xxiv

But here we have to make links that Teilhard did not make: for the covenant that the Eucharist recalls and re-presents is at the same time a cosmic covenant with the whole of creation – as was mentioned earlier- and that this has been forgotten. Often liturgy as we experience it does not convey the truth of the earth’s woundedness. For
this we need to understand sacrifice as a community act of kenosis, a solidarity with the suffering earth/suffering people/ desertified land/ polluted water. We are back again to the necessity of the ascetic ethos that flows from interconnectedness.

For liturgy must become a place where memory/ Anamnesis becomes remembering the rivers that once flowed, what can now never be, given so much destruction. It is a place for the recovery of prophetic lament and grief for all that has disappeared, and the glory of God that can never be, because of what has been destroyed. It is time/space for repentance, for reconvertion to the earth. And finally it is a time of new ethical commitment to lifestyles geared to the flourishing and survival of threatened forms of life, human and non-human.

Ethics for the sustaining of water for future generations.

In this final section I ask, how then should we live, to sustain water for future generations? How can we discover a rigorous ethical framework, when there is a general conviction that ethics is solely about moral principles that human beings invoke to shape their common life, with the earth and her resources included only as backcloth to human endeavour?

The hundred and ten years of Roman Catholic encyclicals on social justice – from Rerum Novarum onwards - offer very few starting points for a specific environmental ethic. The background to this is a dualistic anthropocentric philosophy, relating back to Aristotle, linked with a post-Cartesian rationalism that led increasingly to the competitive individualism that is a major factor in the globalisation discourse, and central to our problem. Add to this the denial until recently of the seriousness of the crisis. Denial works to obliterate external reality, as a way of blocking out the real pain of the world.

So, how to place the environment, and here, specifically, water, as central focus for ethical imperatives? The goal is an ethical framework where human beings take responsibility for the earth, with “the common good”, the well-being of all earth’s resources as focus. Such an approach would take seriously the faith position that water is a commons, a common good, not a commodity. This is proposed by Vandana Shiva and supported, among others, by Canadian activists, Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke. It would open up a way for a water ethic within a framework of structural justice. Buying water, say Barlow and Clarke, is not like buying a pair of shoes or pizza. So, strategy one is to resist the commodification of water and support moves to make it a public service. But what appears logical from within a world view of interconnectedness has a different resonance for those still blinkered by the logic of the market economy!

A similar approach is also that of an alliance of ecofeminists, goddess feminists and ecologists. Carol Christ, for example, has developed Nine Touchstones of Goddess Ethics including principles like “nurture life” and “repair the web,” think of the consequences of your actions for seven generations. But nothing so earth-centred can be discovered within Christianity. What we can do is to build on a solid foundation, like the virtue ethics approach based on Thomas Aquinas, with which I link both Liberation Ethics and Christian traditions on structural justice and push the parameters to comprehend an ethic for the earth. Within So the
The idea of natural law is widened, to take into account the common ground between human and non-human. Secondly, this is integrated within a virtue-centred approach - the virtues concerned being prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Celia Deane Drummond approaches prudence by rejecting the precautionary principle – usually invoked - as inadequate for decision making, since it is directed simply by the worst imagined scenario. Rather, we need to include different facets of prudence.

Now prudence – unlike Gaia - does not have a great press as imaginative tool. It is the facet of deliberation, the capacity to make decisions in emergency situations, to take advice from others, to have foresight in a way that accurately anticipates the future insofar as it is feasible to do so. Prudence is part of wisdom: it is practical prudential knowledge, knowing how to work in harmony with water’s regenerative cycles. So Sophia enters the picture again! Fortitude is the capacity to stand firm in adversity. Temperance – let us rename it as the necessary asceticism or living within limits generated by a world view of interdependence - is particularly important, (and stressed earlier as a focus of Orthodox liturgy) as the ordering of our desires toward the whole and as invoking moderation within the knowledge of nature’s limits. (This is something I see within the technology of water-harvesting - and not only in India). Justice deserves a special focus. For Aquinas it is informed by charity, the gift of the Holy Spirit, so it is theocentric, with God as ultimate arbiter. In Aquinas’s ability to link individual, community and global justice there is a way for justice to include the self-preservation of all life forms and eco-systems. Justice for non-human ecosystems in kinship with the human is the suggestion of Celia Deane- Drummond.

The Virtue Ethics approach can be given a more solid, communal and social basis by linking with liberation ethics. The constant critique of economic systems in the context of structural sin, right from Rerum Novarum onwards, and more specifically with the more recent works like Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, (1987) Centesimus Annus(1991) and Tertio Millennio Adveniente can be built on for an environmental ethic. The focus of ecological liberation ethics is on privileging the poor, seeking justice for the poorest communities, where people and earth are locked in ineradicable cycles of oppression. Nature - including depleted water sources - are now recognised as the new category of poverty. As the shocking statistics with which I began made clear, the rising sea levels, melting ice caps, the polluted water systems along with the human communities affected - have now to be at the centre of liberation struggles for justice. So strategies of resistance, for example, resisting large dams and large-scale interventions, - mentioned earlier – have to be combined with action for solidarity at local, national and international level. And there is so much that is possible for personal life-style changes: asceticism and simplicity in water use; practice of water harvesting at a community level; working for legislation to curb water use in large corporations and in agriculture, insisting on the “principle – “Extraction cannot exceed recharge,” respect the needs and limits of the local ecosystems and so on. For this, Churches must work with scientists, activists, NGOs and international groups – the crisis demands no less.
Conclusion

The focus of this paper is the increasing gravity of the crisis around water, pure drinking water for the poorest people on earth, with polluted water sources and shrinking habitats for sea creatures, seen as the consequences of an economic system that depends on human greed and exploitation of earth’s resources beyond all their limits. Climate change itself is partly generated by such a system. A changed relationship with nature is urgently needed at this eleventh hour, building on strengths of all Christian traditions allied with scientists, ecologists and ecofeminists. The recovery a valuing of God’s of gift economy, and of the sacredness of water as gift, as well as a recovery of sacramental, graced experience both in ordinary lives and in communal worship are intrinsic to Christianity. As a basis for water-ethnic, I suggested the recovery of Aquinas’ virtue-centred ethics linked with a liberation focus on the most vulnerable communities, human and non-human.

But there is one last dimension that is crucial and at the heart of communal living and Christian faith. This is the desire and need for peace. As prophetic communities we must proclaim that there will be no peace in the world without water security: escalating conflicts point to this urgency. As I write, refugees are fleeing the conflict in Gaza, where there is no water and no food. As Isaiah proclaims God’s covenant of peace (54.10): my covenant of peace shall not be removed, so the Gospel of Luke begins with the angelic proclamation of “Peace”. The Risen Christ greets his followers with “Peace be with you.” The giving of peace, central to all our liturgical celebration, must now be a clarion call to work for water security especially for the most vulnerable people of the earth and to resist the trade in water by recovery of its sacred value as shared gift to all.

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i See www.wellsforindia.org

ii See Report, State Government of Rajasthan, Jaipur, 1999, pp.8-9

iii A lakh =100,000


v According to a report from the Environmental Working Group in Washington, DC. This chemical, perchlorate, has been leaking from 12,000 military bases across USA for years, contaminating the water in at least 22 states. Agricultural & dairy farms near the bases are also shipping contaminated produce across USA. The Food & Drug Admin survey found 93% of all lettuce & milk sold in USA is contaminated with perchlorate. Perchlorate has been detected in human breast milk in every woman tested in Texas. Children could suffer permanent neurological damage from just short-term thyroid-hormone insufficiency.


vii Vivendi’s earnings in 2002 were $12 billion

viii Much of this information, including the photo, is from the website of the Israeli Human Rights organisation, B’Tselem. www.btselem.org.


* Here I remain within Christianity. Others have explored more widely.

Elizabeth Theokritoff, in *The Orthodoxy and Ecology Resource Book*, 1996, produced by SYNDREMOS, The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth, eds., Alexander Belopopksky and Dimitri Oikonomou, Printed by Orthodruk Orthodox Printing House, Bialystok, Poland. She is an Orthodox theologian and writer from England, and former Secretary of the Anglican - Orthodox Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.

See an extended version of this section in M.Grey, op cit., pp.88-99.


Alasdair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power*, 2001, London: Aurum Press, pp.131-147. The whole chapter is a story of the struggle of the people - in this case the crofter, Tom Forsyth, to preserve a way of life threatened by the new owner of Eigg, the tycoon, Keith Schellenberg


Deane Drummond, *op cit.,* p.40.

Ibid., p.43.
