WATER: MORE THAN A SYMBOL

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When astronomers gaze out into deep space, or examine the Martian landscape, one of the things they are seeking is an indication of the presence of liquid water, and the reason is a simple one. Water means the possibility of life. It is quite literally a matter of life and death, both for human and all other life on planet Earth.

My aim in this paper is to consider water first as a religious symbol, but then also as something far more than that. My approach is based on a practical theology paradigm in which theory and praxis interact in a dynamic relationship, but also an understanding that all theology is contextual (Bevans 2005). Thus, in this consideration of water as more than a symbol, I am reflecting a south-east Queensland perspective; however, it is important at the outset to note that Queensland covers a vast and diverse geographical area, so that at one and the same time there may be an excess of water and a severe drought. More than that, the global nature of the present and looming water crisis must be noted. The context is therefore particular as well as universal, and religious as well as life-related.

Water as a Faith Symbol
Given that it covers 71% of the Earth’s surface, it should not be surprising that water is one of the most common faith symbols on the planet, and its use extends to most of the world’s religions. There was a practical example of that phenomenon when the State Library of Queensland, in conjunction with River Festival 2007, staged an exhibition called “The Sacred Water of Life”. As the website declares:

*Long revered as the essence of life, Brisbane’s diverse faith communities see water as a precious gift that should be used with care. Water cleanses, purifies, blesses, heals, nurtures, sustains, protects and redeems and it establishes powerful, timeless links between cultures, faiths and traditions.*

*The Sacred Water of Life presents the role of water in the intimate rituals, vibrant religious festivals, celebrations and expressions of faith of more than a dozen Brisbane faith traditions.*

As the website makes clear, the Exhibition engages with Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Jewish faith communities. It is not necessary here to elaborate on the ceremonies involved, but some examples would include the ritual washing of a devout Muslim before prayer, the provision of a large tank of water for ritual washing at a Hindu shrine, and the ceremony known as the Bathing of the Buddha.
In more specific Christian terms, it is instructive to reflect on the way water is regarded in the Bible. In background terms, the most obvious observation is that the Bible was shaped in a land where water is relatively scarce, just as it is in many parts of Australia. It follows therefore that its presence or absence, or indeed its pollution, should be regarded as significant.

A comprehensive study of biblical references to water is not necessary in this context. Nevertheless, it is useful to note, with Walls (1957) that they may be grouped in a number of ways.

First, as generations of Australians have noted, water may be associated with destruction. A major motif is the Flood, in which, as it is recounted in Genesis 6-8, massive losses of human, animal, and plant life ensued. This was interpreted as a sign of divine judgment; but conversely, some were saved from the flooding, so that “judgment and salvation are complementary aspects of each stage of revelation” (Walls, 1957, p.279). Another significant motif was the Exodus, and the drowning of the Egyptians (Exod 15:5f). For the Hebrews, “the deep” was a symbol of grave danger, as for example in the Psalmist’s affirmation in Psalm 18:16. There is an immediate and current point of reference. At the time of writing, South East Queensland and Northern New South Wales have been inundated with heavy rain and flooding, resulting in tens of millions of dollars in damage and some loss of life.

Second, as I have noted above, water is associated with cleansing and renewal, and was extensively used in a figurative as well as a ritual sense. Isaiah, for example (I:16), has God urge the people, “Wash and be clean; put away your evil deeds far from my sight....” In Psalm 1:3, the Psalmist picked up the theme of renewal and growth when he wrote of “a tree planted beside water channels; it yields its fruit in season and its foliage never fades”. Again, water is associated with salvation in Isaiah’s promise in 12:3: “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”

The most obvious example is of course baptism, starting with John the Baptiser’s baptism of repentance as a preparation for the messianic era, and continuing through to the Christian sacrament of baptism, which in one form or another is practised in nearly all branches of the Church. But whether the sacrament is believed to require full immersion or the pouring of water on the candidate’s head, the common factor is that water symbolises both the cleansing of the person and the promise of new life spiritually. In many instances it is regarded as essential that the water is seen to flow, and the reason for that may be found in one of the primary images Jesus used, namely the notion of “living water”.

John’s gospel includes several references that may be noted here. First, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (3:5). More specifically, in John 4:10 Jesus indicates to the woman at the well that he could give her “living water”. Centuries earlier, the prophet Jeremiah (17:13) had described God as “the fountain of living water”. Thus, at one level, “living water” is indicative of the water of life, or new life spiritually. At another level, “living” water referred to clear, pure, cold running water, such as might be found in a mountain stream. As a further indication of the centrality of water imagery in the Christian Faith, at the heart of the Seer’s portrayal of the celestial city, the “New Jerusalem”, is “the river of the water of life” (Rev. 22:1).

A third symbolic element, related to the theme of refreshment, is water to drink. In the time of Moses, the thirsty people demanded of Moses, “Give us water to drink” (Exod. 17:2); and Moses was commanded to “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it” (v.6). The spiritual implications of such a passage are clear enough, that God’s provision is available even in the most barren places. It is far less clear how it translates in real life terms for the very many people who in this modern world are dying for want of clean drinking water.

Clearly water is crucial in terms of Christian spiritual imagery. However, there is one further image that is important for the present discussion. In Matthew 10:42 Jesus highlights the simple act of giving a cup of cold water to someone in need as a prime example of the values of the kingdom of God. I take that to indicate that while the spiritual imagery of water is important in its own right, water is more than a symbol. At this point our theology has a very practical aspect.

**Water in Context**

In recent times, while Australia has experienced a range of environmental impacts, including ecological degradation as part of a global phenomenon, extreme weather events, soil degradation, and species loss, the most immediate and obvious issue has related to climate change and global warming, with its associated issues of prolonged drought affecting rural and urban areas alike. Quite clearly, all of these issues are inter-related.

In 2005 the Queensland Government issued a significant discussion paper on climate change which stated bluntly, “Queensland is getting hotter, and our temperatures are rising more rapidly than both the global and national averages” (2005, p.1). It goes on to note changes in the rainfall patterns, the increased intensity of storms, and likely shortages of water. Important though that was, it did not make many headlines. But public perception of environmental matters began to change noticeably during 2006, urged on by a number of
factors. One was the publicity given to Al Gore’s film “An Inconvenient Truth”, and the Stern Report in Britain; the comprehensive Report by the Lowy Institute, Heating Up the Planet (Dupont and Pearman 2006), which sought to bring together the scientific consensus about global warming, appeared to make a relatively minor impact.

In a more immediate sense, by the end of that year it was increasingly obvious that something significant was happening to the climate. In many parts of Australia, a prolonged drought was causing grave concern, and it began to affect much more than the rural sector. The devastating situation of the huge Murray-Darling system has generated major concern, while cities and towns accustomed to taking water for granted have suddenly faced a crisis.

During the course of 2007, climate became news on an almost daily basis, and formerly apathetic or sceptical politicians could not ignore it. In February of that year the Press quite correctly reflected widespread concern, based on the connection many people were starting to make between the drought and global warming. As dams in South East Queensland reached 20% of capacity, and other towns far less, Brisbane’s “Courier Mail” reported, “We could run out of water” (28th Feb). Severe water restrictions had to be imposed, and some towns even ran out of water. Debate has raged about the building of new dams, the creation of desalination plants, and what some critics emotively styled as “drinking recycled sewage”. The phrase “Armageddon situation” quietly slipped into the vocabulary of leading politicians. At the same time the “Guardian” ran a story entitled “Australia suffers its worst drought in 1,000 years”, subtitled “Depleted reservoirs, failed crops and arid farmland spark global warming tussle” (2nd March). With more than half of the nation’s farmland in drought, in some cases for five years or more, the situation has clearly caused widespread concern, and raised the important question as to whether this is a drought or more permanent climate change.

In 2009 the health of the south-east Queensland water supply has improved considerably; at the time of writing dam levels have reached approximately 74%. The risk is that the difficulties of recent years may lower expectations, and that one good wet season may lull people into thinking that the crisis has passed. However, in a booklet called “Water for the Future” issued by the Queensland Government in June 2007, a succinct attempt was made to outline some of the key background issues and a plan to manage water into the future.

The Queensland Government booklet begins by attempting to outline briefly some of the factors behind the water crisis in the State. These include the fact of drought, which in the South East is described as the worst in 100 years, and the impact of climate change. The
relationship between these two factors is important, as it is also in other parts of the country. It is hard to be precise about the impact of climate change, and it is difficult also to be sure of the line between a prolonged drought on the one hand and more permanent climate change on the other. The Report goes on to refer to the need to manage demand with a growing population, and to suggest that “a single solution to the long-term water needs of SEQ does not exist” (p.4).

**Living with Ambiguity**

But any plans the Government may have to deal with the issues tend to bring their own problems, thus suggesting a broader issue, namely the need to try to deal with the difficulty of living with ambiguity. I will refer to three of the Queensland Government’s responses.

One response, to which I have already made some passing reference, is to build what is called the “Western Corridor Recycled Water Project”. This involves the creation of 200 kilometres of pipeline to connect six existing and three new water treatment plants, to provide purified water for industry, agriculture, and to supplement drinking supplies. It is the last-mentioned possibility that tends to provoke a somewhat hysterical outcry from some sectors of the community. Nevertheless, appropriate use of grey water and the continued efforts to purify waste water are important dimensions of responsible water management. Jennifer Simpson has issued an educational booklet, “From waste-water to pure water” (2008), and it is hoped that with the support of the National Water Commission of the Australian Government it will make a useful contribution to popular understanding.

A second project relates to a Desalination Plant at Tugan on the Gold Coast. At one level this is good news, in that it generates a water supply that does not depend on rainfall. However, the question that must be asked is how much greenhouse gas must be pumped into the atmosphere in order to pump fresh water into domestic homes. Further, there are concerns about the impact on the surrounding coastal area. There are no simple answers to the dilemma that is posed, but it illustrates the fact that ambiguity is close to the heart of our modern living.

A third response to the water crisis is the proposed Traveston Crossing Dam, which the Government argues is essential to ensure Queensland’s water supply. But it has been hugely controversial in Queensland over several years. In part this has been because of concern over the suitability of the area for a dam, and the fact that good farming land will be lost along with the disruption of families. But more than that, there is concern that the habitat of the rare Mary River lungfish will be destroyed. As Smith, Carruthers and Bunn
(2005) note, altered flow from structures such as a dam can result in habitat modification. It is not possible to know at this juncture what the outcome will be, but one certainty is that for every proposed solution there is a countering negative.

But there is perhaps no better illustration of the problem of living with ambiguity than in some domestic water use practices. Even at the height of the water crisis in the South East, with the prospect of Brisbane running out of water, private swimming pools were still being built. Any attempt to ban such a luxury would of course be met with a huge outcry; but at some point decisions will need to be made based on sound judgment and assessment of priorities. To what extent will the population be prepared to forego some luxuries in water usage for the sake of a greater need? As the Government paper suggests, “As a region, we all need to think smarter about how we use water” (p.4).

There are of course other aspects of this problem of living with ambiguity; for example, the need to fly from Australia to the UK in order to research Church responses in environmental care is classically ambiguous, and some might argue that it is close to being a contradiction in terms. Even when we “tread the Earth lightly”, we are still bound to leave a footprint. But the whole dilemma of living with ambiguity needs to be faced, even if many of the issues may not be easily resolved.

**Wider Implications**

The ramifications of any consideration of water are considerable; for example, it is clear that the impact of climate change on water availability is not evenly spread. As Dupont and Pearman observe:

> Changes in the variability and distribution of rainfall could also exacerbate fresh water scarcity in water deficient states. In a world where over two billion people already live in countries suffering moderate to high water stress, and half the world’s population is without adequate sanitation or drinking water, relatively small shifts in rainfall patterns could push countries and whole regions into deficit, leading to a series of water crises with global implications (2006, p.32-3).

Such a position from an Australian perspective is echoed by British scholars such as Spencer and White, who also note that already dry areas will become even drier through both diminished rainfall and increased evaporation. They note that:

> It is estimated that today 2% of the world’s land area is suffering extreme drought, a doubling since 20 years ago. By 2050 this is expected to rise to between 10 and 12% of the land area (2007, p.38).
It is neither possible nor necessary here to explore all the ecological or scientific factors involved; but it quickly becomes apparent that water problems are closely related to what is loosely called “the eco crisis”. Initially it may appear that “eco-crisis” is an accurate enough description of an increasingly obvious global reality, but on closer examination it will appear to be a term that is seriously limiting in its grasp. As James Nash states, to talk of the “environmental problem” is rather like referring to a nuclear conflagration as a fire. Thus, he asserts that it is not “a single, discrete problem, but rather a massive mosaic of intertwined problems” adversely affecting all life (1991, p.23). That assessment is demonstrably correct, as also is his perception that the issues involved are primarily of a moral nature. In a similar vein, Moltmann (1985) argues that “the natural environment of human beings cannot be understood apart from the social environment”, and asserts that “…the phrase ecological crisis is a feeble and inaccurate description of the real facts. This is really a crisis of the whole life system of the modern industrial world” (1985, p.23).

The point not only for Moltmann but also for Nash and others is that humans have created the crisis we are now experiencing, and we are entrenching both ourselves and the environment more and more deeply. Since powerful forces are at work in this process, the economic and social conditions of human life must be changed for the sake of our ecological future. I contend that this wider perspective of the crisis is essential in understanding the current situation and how to respond to it, not least in terms of water. Aspects of climate change, such as a looming environmental refugee crisis, loss of food production, implications for disease and security, additional pressure on power requirements, carbon footprint and other matters therefore mingle with the wider implications of social justice to demand attention.

Thus, it starts to become obvious that the current crisis, including as it must issues of water, does not exist independently of either national boundaries or the human community. In his report on the Stockholm Earth Summit, Granberg-Michaelson states that debate focussed on “the suspicion that environmental concerns are a luxury of affluent Northern societies” (1992, p.9). At the Rio Summit, however, there was the perception that this was more than just a regional or national matter. Whether it related to the use of CFC’s, the environmental impact of poverty, extreme weather events, or something else, “ecology has been seen in its global dimension” (1992, p.11). Granberg-Michaelson’s words may seem dramatic, but they are as true today as they were in 1992:

The point is that in the two decades between Stockholm and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, evidence became overwhelming that ecological damage is global in nature, binding North and South together towards an escalating common tragedy, or on new paths towards a common, sustainable future (1992, p.17).
A point that emerges as one of fundamental importance is that Christianity is necessarily social as well as personal, and that appropriate political action is one of the essential tools of effective eco-mission. It is significant that in my research, those involved in eco-mission were virtually unanimous in their affirmation of political action.

The Matter of Equity
The need of water for agricultural use in irrigation poses another problem with far-reaching implications. A related issue is that of equity in water rights; in research undertaken by Claudia Baldwin and published in 2006 (Baldwin and Ross) that emerged as an issue of concern among farmers in the Lockyer Valley and lower Balonne regions. The Lockyer relies heavily on irrigation, and so it is not surprising that it has been identified as a stressed groundwater area. Further, there is a history of institutional challenge over water reforms, and there is a history of conflict over water.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of the equity issue is the problem of upstream-downstream usage, both for irrigation and domestic purposes. Baldwin found that while a majority of irrigators in the Lockyer “indicated that those upstream have a moral obligation to look after the interests of those downstream (2006, p.5), but that position was not unanimous. The prime example of this problem is undoubtedly the inter-State controversy that has raged over the amount of water drawn from the Murray-Darling system by the giant Cubbie Station in Queensland. The charge is that it deprives both down-river farmers and the river system itself of essential water. In the ambiguity of this situation, how is the balance to be maintained? A further example of this difficulty was illustrated for me by a friend who has farmed for some decades at St George; but in recent years the shortage of water, whether from irrigation or rainfall, has left the property almost valueless.

It starts to become obvious that equity is not merely about the human community, and ensuring that everyone gets their fair share. The natural environment is a primary stakeholder; without a healthy environment, economic issues are almost irrelevant. Thus, environmental sustainability is crucial. In writing of the Lockyer, Baldwin and Ross note that “The level of unsustainable use has led to declining underground water levels in alluvial aquifers and reduced pumping rates” (2006, p.3). That in turn led to a moratorium on further underground bores in 2005. But the research reveals a significant problem of definition. It may readily be acknowledged that sustainability must include social and economic factors, but it is of concern that Baldwin found some irrigators “expressed clear discomfort with the concept of environmental sustainability”, and referred to sustainability as “having a sound regional economy that would support a stable community” (2006, p.4).
Such a definition, while consistent with an econocentric position, is clearly problematic in environmental terms.

**Are there any Solutions?**

If, as I have argued, water cannot be regarded as a single discreet issue, but must be considered as part of a much larger complex of issues, are there any possible solutions in sight? It would surely be obvious that there are no quick or easy answers, and that a multi-faceted approach that recognises the inter-connectedness of water with other issues would be essential. Furthermore, it will be clear that a shortage of water in one part of the world can rarely, if ever, be made up from a surplus in another part of the world – hence the need for a global approach to dealing the deep underlying causes. Nevertheless, within such a framework, I suggest that there are a number of responses that can help.

First, while the level of concern about the environment in general and water in particular is perceptibly rising, there is a need for a higher level of awareness of causal factors and possible remedial action. A number of organisations and groups are seeking to fulfil such an educative role, but more needs to be done in particular to try to seize the imagination of people of goodwill in the community.

Second, as I suggested above, the theme of living with ambiguity is an important one, and I believe it is necessary at least for key environmental groups to begin to come to terms with it in a realistic fashion. As part of that process we could well consider the difference between needs and wants, and to examine the extent to which our personal or community greed contributes, even in terms of water usage, contributes to the overall problem.

Third, the encouragement of a sustainable eco-friendly personal lifestyle can undergird other efforts made at a community, state, or national level. In my own case, my wife and I have a significant native garden on a 777m2 suburban block of land, including flowering trees and shrubs that attract native birdlife. We have installed a water tank, while green waste that we are not able to compost ourselves is recycled through the Regional Council, and other waste is also recycled, so that our normal weekly landfill waste is reduced to two small bags. In addition we have insulated our home, installed a solar hot water system, photovoltaic cells to generate 1.5 kilowatts of electricity, and we drive a small car, so that in all possible ways we have taken steps to reduce our carbon footprint. We would not claim that our response is unique, or that we could not do more, but rather that it is illustrative of what is possible in a suburban context.
Fourth, the dominance of anthropocentric thinking and assumptions in the Church tends to obscure the wider dimensions and implications of God’s creation. As I have argued elsewhere, a theistic biocentric approach places God rather than humans at the centre, and recognises that life on Earth is inclusive and inter-dependent – that animal, marine, and plant life have value in their own right, in terms of the inclusive covenant of God with Noah (Gen. 9). In a real sense, if one form of life is diminished, all life is diminished.

Fifth, local congregations can play their part by committing to an eco-mission agenda as an essential part of their overall mission strategy. This is starting to happen in various parts of Australia, but two water-related examples may serve to illustrate what is possible.

When some members of the Northmead Uniting Church in NSW noticed that a creek and bushland area adjacent to the Church was in need of regeneration, they decided to adopt one section of it. They regarded this as part of their Christian witness, and interestingly the work of the Uniting Church was publicly acknowledged. From that initial awareness some forms of ecotheological and eco-mission awareness have emerged.

The second example is Waterlines, which rose out of the Uniting Church Earth Ministry in North Sydney, and while it is not currently operational, it set out to be a 3-year research and reflection project based on the catchment of the Lane Cove River. The aim was to “research the environmental significance of water in this region in such a way as to inform the way we do theology with reference to the land and our sense of place” (website). They saw this connection between the landscape and its inhabitants as a reminder “that we are sustained by the natural environment and are in turn required to care for the earth.” The project claimed to be the first of its type in Australia to make connections across geography, religion, communities, and academic discourses.

The examples of practical action that I have cited are illustrative rather than comprehensive; doubtless there are other steps that may be taken, and they invariably involve people and communities working together to achieve a common goal.

**Water: more than a Symbol**

Earlier I outlined some of the ways in which water is regarded as a prime religious symbol, both in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also among other faiths as well. The fact that water is scarce in the land of the Bible adds to the significance of that observation. Christian people in particular need to re-visit their spiritual base, and in particular to re-examine the connection between the spiritual and the physical; in other words, they need to come to grips with the implications of the Incarnation.
If, by the grace of God, the spiritual was “earthed” in the coming of Jesus Christ, then surely it must also be “earthed” in the lives of his 21st century disciples. In more specific terms, how dare we speak the promise of God in terms of “living water”, if we are not profoundly disturbed by the fact that so many of the world’s most vulnerable people are forced to drink polluted water?

Water is a most significant symbol of faith, representing as it does the promise of new life. But it needs to be more than a symbol; it needs to be translated into real life for people here and now. Jesus’ comment about the significance of a cup of cold water is still relevant; and we today face the task and challenge of translating his promise of “living water” – pure, clear, cold, running water – into something tangible in the lives of all God’s people and creatures.
Bibliography


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