

A Human Right to Water?

Beginning Ethical Consideration of Water Development and Allocation Decisions

Water, often now a limited resource, has historically been at the center of tensions between competing interests in locations all over the Earth. Increasing population pressures, combined with the prospect of climate change and reports of water scarcity worldwide, are making decisions about water development and allocation not just difficult, but painful. In these circumstances, those who contribute to such decisions – scientists, engineers, economists, and others who are often schooled and trained primarily in technical fields – may find themselves ill-prepared to come to what they believe to be equitable solutions to very challenging social *and* technical problems.

This project proposes to test over the coming academic year what theological and ethical reflection may offer to help clarify some of the choices that lie with these decision-makers – choices that may affect persons, cities, and regions for years, or even for generations. Working in Boston with technically-oriented professionals and students who also feel some moral concern about the consequences for others of their work in the water field, this undertaking will make water as a human right the starting point for a cycle of discussions that try to discern some helpful guidelines for these hard choices.

The project has three goals:

- Identify case studies that bring some of the current ethical issues present in water development and allocation forward. These cases are intended to provide shared material for joint discernment toward strong grounds for ethical decision-making in this area.
- Identify a small set of questions that encourage decision-makers in the water business to examine for themselves with greater depth and clarity the implications and consequences of the choices that they make.
- Work toward articulating a small number of criteria that provide guidance and support to those involved in making decisions about water supply and sanitation in light of the challenges that are named above.

These efforts promise no formula that adequately answers the multiple challenges present in water management as it is now practiced, or as it will be practiced in coming decades. Engineers, scientists, economists, lawyers, public health professionals, and others already bring sophisticated professional skills to bear on these complicated problems. Their knowledge contributes importantly to clarifying and resolving with some objectivity many of the complexities inherent in oversight of water resources. These talents are exercised in increasingly contentious social contexts, however, that call for what might be called greater moral objectivity. This project aims to see whether better grounds and means for practicing that form of objectivity might be found with the participation and guidance of just those who will likely contribute to decisions that will fundamentally affect countless lives well into the future.