

Editor's Introduction

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Hydrologists tell us that every man, woman, and child in the world needs, on average, about 1100 cubic meters of water per year to survive. By way of a rough visualization of that volume, imagine enough water to fill a typical two-story home in the United States. Per person. Per year. We are, as our authors remind us, water people.

Currently, the Middle East doesn't have nearly enough water to supply its current populations. Given the current conflicts in the region--conflicts we associate with oil, sectarian divisions, despotic regimes, and nation building--one question we might ask would be, "When will we see a significant war over water in the Middle East?"¹ Probably a better one would be, "Why hasn't there already been a war over water?"

The basic answer to that question is that the Middle East imports its water in virtual form. Of those 1100 cubic meters per person per year, only about 100 are for purposes of drinking, bathing, and sanitation. The remaining 1000 are for growing crops and raising livestock--which, in its own way, is a small reminder not only that we are water people, but that, even standing on dry land, we're part of a water-bound creation. And the Middle East imports vast quantities of food--most notably grains--grown in other parts of the world, thereby importing "virtual water." It can do so because (a) much of the Middle East is rich in another resource (namely, oil) that makes buying food possible; (b) foodstuffs are highly subsidized--and therefore cheap--by food exporting nations around the world; and (c) foodstuffs can be subsidized because agribusiness relies on the use of petroleum products--including in fertilizers and transport--to grow food in the quantities that make political prospects for subsidies attractive by exporting nations. Apparently, subsidizing farmers in Kansas also subsidizes peace in the Middle East.²

Yet as arable land around the world grows more scarce (due, in part, to climactic change that complicates water distribution and usage), as international and domestic politics make subsidies more difficult and as the world increasingly develops alternative energy sources, making oil costs more competitive, that virtual water imported to the Middle East is likely to get more and more expensive and scarce. This doesn't bode well for peace and stability. And at the root of the matter: water.

¹ Though not precisely a war over water, the internal conflicts in Syria were driven, in part, by a series of the worst droughts in recorded history in the area. While this hasn't been a war over water *per se*, there's little doubt that the absence of water was an exacerbating--if not initiating--factor in the conflict.

² See Tony Allen, "Watersheds and Problemsheds: Explaining the Absence of Armed Conflict over Water in the Middle East," cited in Jason J. Morrisette and Douglas A. Borer, "Where Oil and Water Do Mix: Environmental Scarcity and Future Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa" *Parameters* (Winter, 2004-5): 94-95.

So what are we water people to do with information like this? How are we to value water? Why might we Christians, in our watery baptisms, incur special responsibilities to think about water and the creation that relies on it?

Towards answering such questions, this edition of *@ this point* is fortunate to have a fascinating mix of writers who all, in their own ways, have been thinking about water and what it means to be water people. Columbia Theological Seminary Associate Professor of Theology Martha Moore-Keish leads the way, exploring how our baptisms might shape our reflections on water that is "contested, contaminated, and scarce." Responding to her are another Columbia Seminary colleague, Associate Professor of New Testament Stan Saunders, who highlights the way contestations about power, water, and empire shape contemporary liturgical practices, Mark Koenig, whose insights into the United Nations' vision of water as a right inform contemporary international politics, and Rachel Hart Winter, whose own experiences with water scarcity and the providence of God in the Marshall Islands signal important questions and insights that all of need to attend to when we perform such simple but symbolically rich acts as those associated with practices of baptism and hospitality. And Columbia Seminary alum Jill Tolbert rounds out the writing cast, once again providing a wonderful set of curricular materials for teaching through this edition of *@ this point*.

Collectively, these are an insightful set of essays. Perhaps their greatest advantage, though, is that even as they quench our need for wisdom in a climate that can be all-too-theologically-dry, they simultaneously drive us onward towards new springs of cool living waters, new insights about our baptismal practices, and new possibilities about ways to engage a world in which water, though "contested, contaminated, and scarce," is also a gift from God and, therein, a responsibility for we water people to take on. Read them and grow refreshed.