Water Management in Monotheistic Religions

Water management practices and motivation among the world’s three predominant monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—with an emphasis on Islam.

Questions:
• What role(s) does religion play in government, particularly regarding water resources?
• What role(s) should religion play in the same?

Introduction
Secular instruction in the United States is predominantly based on the tenets of Christendom. Note that these are not the same as the tenets of Christianity. Christianity is a religion whereas Christendom is a civilization. Therefore, under this case, the pedagogy in schools, the sociality among peers, and even the everyday governance of life fall under the broad stroke of Christendom.

Please note that classifying a civilization as being of the order of Christendom is in no way meant to demean or support any individual set of practices or beliefs; it is simply an attempt of categorizing a whole. Taking the view of one looking outward from the base of Christendom, other civilizations appear different and the desire to compare is natural. While comparing, care should be taken to contrast the best with the best and the worst with the worst. In other words, comparisons are of little worth if the best of one’s own way of life is contrasted to the worst of another’s—comparisons of this sort lead to bias, prejudice, bigotry, or worse.

In discussing water management in monotheistic religions, attention is placed on both the water management side of the topic and the religions themselves. For a discussion to be meaningful, at least a cursory look at religious aspects is necessary.

Monotheistic Religions
Multiple sources state that over half of the world’s peoples adhere to one of the monotheistic religions. Christianity is listed as highest in number (~2 B), followed by Islam (~1.2 B) and Judaism (~15 M). These three groups are related in that all are classified as an Abrahamic religion—their histories each include the prophet Abraham.

Starting with Adam, Judaism follows the progression of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and continues with rabbinical tradition, of which the Talmud is a part. Christianity shares, to many degrees, origins with Judaism and uses the Hebrew Bible as their Old Testament. Christians view Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the words of the ancient prophets, as the Son of God, and as the
Islam can be viewed, in part, as a continuation of the Christian view of the prophets, with
Jesus included as a prophet. In Islam, the prophet Muhammad is held as the last of God’s
messengers who restored truths and a way of life which were lost as time progressed after being
given previously to other prophets.

Each of the three main Abrahamic religions is a major player in human history. This is so from
both a religious and secular standpoint. As attention is placed on modern times, and to streamline
discussion, the morals and values of Judaism and Christianity are joined with the term: Judeo-
Christian. The Judeo-Christian view is what can be called Christendom today.

**Water Management**

Water management in the United States is a result, to a large measure, of the traditions and views
of Christendom. Having thus said, it is taken that the majority of what has been used as a base in
the transboundary water resources course is a result of the Judeo-Christian view. This
assumption is taken to facilitate comparison between the Judeo-Christian and Islamic views of
water management.

To a large degree, water management is a government affair. Our own First Amendment is the
basis of the separation of church and state: “Congress shall make no law respecting an
establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” While this is the case in the
United States, the Islamic world operates under different guidelines. In Islam, God’s law is
supreme, and state laws often reflect this view. Some liberal circles in Islam are calling for a
separation of church and state; the near-future may see this discussion played out to a greater
extent.

To better understand water management in Islam, consider Faruqui’s explanation from Chapter 1
of *Water Management in Islam* on water as a social good:

- Water is first and foremost a social good in Islam – a gift from God and a part of, and
  necessary for, sustaining all life.
- Water belongs to the community as a whole – no individual literally owns water.
- The first priority for water use is access to drinking water of acceptable quantity and
  quality to sustain human life, and every human being has the right to this basic water
  requirement.
- The second and third priorities for water are for domestic animals and for irrigation.
- Humankind is the steward of water on earth.
- The environment (both flora and fauna) has a very strong and legitimate right to water
  and it is vital to protect the environment by minimizing pollution. Individuals,
  organizations, and states are liable for harm that they have caused to the environment or
to the environmental rights of others, including water use rights.
- Water resources must be managed and used in a sustainable way.
- Sustainable and equitable water management ultimately depends upon following
  universal values such as fairness, equity, and concern for others.
Water is held as a gift from God and for the whole community. Taking this with the arid conditions that exist in much of the Islam world naturally leads to water conservation; in fact, it is central to Islam. Despite no one having ownership of water, cost recovery is allowable for the sale of services and systems that provide water. At the same time, the government is responsible to ensure equity in both pricing and service (Faruqui).

When thinking of the Islamic world, one may picture a dry desert scene (unless thinking of Indonesia—the most populous Muslim-majority nation). Simply picturing such may make one thirsty. In water scarce areas, much can be done to try to meet the needs of a thirsty population. This is a tricky problem, especially when the population continues to increase while water resources do not.

**Family Planning**

Equity, quality of life, and access to drinking water are highly valued principles of Islam. Population growth can be seen as compromising these in water scarce areas. The question arises: To what degree is family planning allowed and practiced in Islam? While some Islamic scholars are against birth control, an overall ban is difficult to find. Due to a lack of outright forbiddance in the Quran or hadith (teachings of Muhammad), the majority of scholars believe in the principal of contraception. This is not without conditions, though. The Islamic definition of a family is of married man and woman. Family planning, including contraception, in Islam is only allowable within this family setting. At the same time, contraception must be based on mutual consent and cannot be imposed. In addition, the method(s) has to be contraceptive—it must be based on prevention, not abortion. Because children are considered a blessing in Islam, family planning should not be encouraged solely for material reasons, nor for political reasons (e.g. to control the population of a particular group) (Faruqui).

An interesting case study in Iran on family planning sheds light into an alternate approach to handling water resource needs in a water scarce area. The Islamic Republic or Iran, as its official name suggests, is an Islamic nation which actively used family planning techniques and instruction to combat overcrowding, housing and water shortages, pollution, and unemployment. The methods used in this government-launched program included (Faruqui):

- The minimum marriage age was increased
- Every couple must attend birth control classes before applying for a marriage license
- All forms of contraception were provided free of charge

Note that the whole focus of family planning in Islam appears to be focused on the familial relationship between husband and wife. There is no provision or even mention of unmarried relationships. The reason lies in the underlying religious/legal moral code of chastity before marriage. In a society with very little unmarried immoral relationships, attention need not be placed on that which is against both the law of God and the law of the land.

-Returning to the Iranian case study-

The results of the governmental family planning actions included reducing the population growth rate to 1.47 percent in one decade (effectually half the previous rate). This earned Iran the UN Population Award for 1999. In addition, the fertility rate (births per woman) decreased from 6.7 (in 1980) to 2.8 (in 1997). Similar results are reported in other Islamic countries (Faruqui).
Conclusion

Dealing with the issues surrounding water resource management in any area can be difficult. It can be seen that many methods and means of doing so in Islam are similar to those practiced in Judeo-Christian areas. However, an underlying principle of the Islamic way of life (religion) lends significant support to water access and quality—for people, plants, and animals.

We live in a society that often clamors to keep church and state separate. In so doing, have we lost a common uniting thread that binds us to one another as neighbors and members of a larger family? The Islamic principle of equity is applicable in water resources as in other aspects of life: provide for those in need. This principle, combined with many others, can create a society where the advancement of the whole is preferred to the elevation of self. In water scarce areas (and perhaps in all areas) this ideology may lead to solutions which will meet the needs of all. Approaching a utopian way of life through the synthesis of the good of different cultures will only be made possible with education and change.

Education is available. Can we embrace change?

Questions:
- What principles of Islam, properly applied, would benefit our society?
- Which good aspects of our culture(s) might benefit Islam?

Required Reading


NOTE: text of this chapter is available online from Google Books. From the following link, simply enter the page number of interest in the Page field:

Additional Resources


Chapter 7: Sociocultural acceptability of wastewater reuse in Palestine, by Nader Al Khateeb, pp. 79-84.


Chapter 9: Ownership and transfer of water and land in Islam, by Dante A Caponera, pp. 94-102.