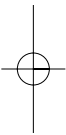


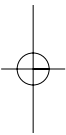


**HEALING THE ENLIGHTENMENT RIFT:
RATIONALITY, SPIRITUALITY
AND SHARED WATERS**

Aaron T. Wolf



Water management, by definition, is conflict management. Water, unlike other scarce, consumable resources, is used to fuel *all* facets of society, from biologies to economies to aesthetics to spiritual practice. Moreover, it fluctuates wildly in space and time, its management is usually fragmented and it is often subject to vague, arcane and/or contradictory legal principles. As such, there is no such thing as managing water for a single purpose—all water management is multi-objective and based on navigating competing interests. Within a nation, these interests include domestic users, agriculturalists, hydropower generators, recreators and environmentalists. Any two of the interests are regularly at odds, and the complexity of finding mutually acceptable solutions increases exponentially as more stakeholders are involved. Add international boundaries, and the difficulty grows substantially yet again.



While press reports of international waters often focus on conflict, there are encouraging stories throughout the world on how water also induces cooperation, even in particularly hostile basins, and even as disputes rage over other issues. This has been true from the Jordan Basin (between Arabs and Israelis) to the Indus Basin (between Indians and Pakistanis) to the Kura-Araks Basin (among Georgians, Armenians and Azeris). Despite empirical research that repeatedly shows how water-related cooperation has vastly exceeded conflict over the last fifty years, prevailing theories fail to explain this phenomenon.¹ Certainly, there is a long history of conflicts over, or related to, shared freshwater resources; yet, there is also a long and in many ways deeper history of water-related cooperation.² Why do countries that share a basin cooperate on water, even when they will not cooperate over other issues? Water is a resource upon which we are all dependent and for which there is little detailed guidance in international law.³ By any quantitative measure, water should be the most conflictive of resources, not an elixir that drives enemies to craft functioning and resilient institutional arrangements.

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Studies offer economic, environmental or strategic rationale to explain this “hydro-cooperation,” but none of these studies seem completely adequate.⁴ Prevailing wisdom in both the science and policy of water resources does not seem to provide the foundation for answering this clearly ethical question. Perhaps some part of the answer lies not in the world of rationality, but rather in the spiritual, ethical and moral dimensions of water conflict resolution. Incorporating these components may offer not only new understanding of current disputes, but also models, tools and strategies for more effective water conflict management and transformation in the future.

This paper seeks to investigate the potential of integrating a spiritual understanding of water conflict transformation with currently prevailing economic, environmental and strategic constructs. First, the context of the current understanding of water conflict and cooperation is presented. Then, the geography of what I call the Enlightenment rift—the process by which the North/West separated out the worlds of rationality from spirituality—is investigated by exploring the impact this rift has on ideas related to natural resource management.⁵ This idea is then developed under the context of the current clash of worldviews, as the North/West entwines its rational construct with the flow of international development capital and management philosophies, and the inevitable disconnect as these approaches collide with the more integrated views of the South/East. In closing, this paper describes how the two worldviews might be gently interwoven within a fairly universal construct of the Four Worlds of perception, and how this construct might be employed within the framework of more effective water conflict management and transformation.

WATER, CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

Water is a unique and vital resource for which there is no substitute. It ignores political boundaries, fluctuates in both space and time and has multiple and conflicting demands on its use—problems compounded in the international realm by the fact that the international law that governs it is poorly developed, contradictory and unenforceable. It is no wonder, then, that water is perpetually named not only as a cause of historic armed conflict, but also as the resource that will bring combatants to the battlefield in the 21st century. What is the likelihood that “the wars of the next century will be over water,” as some have predicted?⁶

In order to cut through the prevailing anecdotal approach to the history of water conflicts, researchers at Oregon State University (OSU) undertook a three-year research project, which attempted to compile a dataset of every reported interaction between two or more nations, whether conflictive or cooperative, that involved water as a scarce and/or consumable resource or as a quantity to be managed, i.e., cases in which water was the driver of events.⁷ The study documented a total of