

Water and society

The role of religion in the acceptance of reclaimed water

A completed Water Research Commission (WRC) study investigated the acceptability of reclaimed water by those of the Muslim faith.

Background

Municipalities such as eThekweni are contemplating the use of reclaimed water to supplement existing potable water supply. Residents have protested against these plans, with the seemingly largest objections coming from those of Muslim faith.

Muslim users in some towns have claimed that wastewater reclamation and reuse are unclean and unIslamic. On the other hand, there have been no reports of Muslims in other towns practicing reclamation, such as Beaufort West, objecting to the water. Muslims in other countries have also not objected in this way to reclamation practices.

What does Islam say about water and water purification? What led Muslims in Beaufort West to accept water reclamation? This study is a step in the direction of finding answers to these questions.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to address a set of questions emerging from the protests in Durban and the acceptance of water reclamation in other areas. It asks if there was a deeper religious justification to these responses, and what it was.

The research team addressed the questions directly to religious scholars in the country. They are the recognised leaders of Muslims, guiding them in mosques and other community settings.

Key outcomes and findings

The significance of water as a scarce resource will only increase on the local and global level. South Africa is a country with a unique water supply. There are no massive rivers feeding the country. More significantly, water supply is extremely uneven.

Water reclamation practices are common in a number of Muslim-majority countries. There is a high degree of awareness about the need for water management in the face of urbanisation, population growth and industrialisation.

Many of these countries are located in arid zones. There is clearly a sense of urgency expressed in the literature, indicating that much more needs to be done to preserve water resources of the regions and countries concerned.

Religion does not seem to be a major impediment in water reclamation practices. There is a general sense and appreciation of water as a valuable resource, and that it should be preserved as a general ethical good.

One juridical opinion (fatwā) issued by Saudi religious scholars in 1978 paved the way for water reuse in agriculture, recreation and even ritual use. This opinion was cited but did not form the basis of justification for projects outside the Gulf region. It is evident that a categorical statement on water reclamation would prepare the way for greater public participation in water reuse and reclamation.

The main contribution of this project lies in underlining the religious significance of water for Muslims in the country. Water plays a vital role in the ritual and ethical practices of Muslims across the globe.

Further, water plays a fundamental role in Islamic jurisprudence. It has been discussed extensively in books relating to medical treatment, in public ethics, and in purification practices.

Muslim jurists in the past and present classified water and impurities extensively. They deliberated on conditions that made water impure and unfit for purification, and also outlined in detail the processes required for such water to be restored to its state of purity.

Jurists were acutely conscious of impurities that changed the nature and quality of the water. They outlined ways in which water could be purified, either by directly removing the impurities or through natural means (dilution of flow).

The main framework of the juridical tradition was shaped before industrialisation and modern scientific threats. The tradition did not treat water as a scarce resource threatened by pollution, population growth, pathogens or acute scarcity.

These are modern challenges that demand attention. Nevertheless, the juridical foundations seemed to be applicable to modern contaminants that threaten natural water resources.

The basic methods of purification in Islamic jurisprudence confirm to the goals of modern water reclamation, and provide a basis of supporting water reclamation for general human use.

The representative groups of religious scholars supported a comprehensive water reclamation plan for South Africa. They shared their insights on the value of water in Islam, and asked that the scope of the report be expanded by including medical and public life issues.

While supporting water management and reclamation, they expressed their reservations on three points. Firstly, they supported indirect potable reuse, and not direct potable reuse. Secondly, they asked the WRC to provide more information on treatment plants, especially with respect to health risks to drinkable water that appeared a challenge to contemporary water supplies. Lastly, they supported greater efforts to

curb wastage and leaks in water supply systems at the local, municipal level.

From their side, the religious scholars committed themselves to promote water conservation and recycling. In particular, they proposed that recycling of water in mosques should be actively promoted. They also committed themselves to establish and support active campaigns to raise greater awareness among citizens on responsible water use.

Conclusion

Water resonates deeply in the day-to-day lives of Muslims in South Africa and beyond. The study was a first step in documenting the extent of water reclamation projects and developments in Muslim countries.

The study was also successful in presenting a detailed framework for understanding the ethical and judicial significance of water in the Islamic tradition. This framework made it possible to address the key questions of the project. Water reclamation was supported by Muslims in a constructive manner.

The majority of Muslim scholars supported indirect potable reuse. They were concerned about the continuous threats to water, and called for caution in the implementation of water reclamation practices. Muslims were particularly concerned about the threats of medical hazards in the water supply.

At the same time, the religious leaders called upon mosques to lead by example and introduce water saving and recycling measures. They called upon themselves and other religious leaders to raise awareness on water conservation and water management challenges in the country.

Further reading:

To order the report, *Islamic jurisprudence and conditions for acceptability of reclamation of wastewater for potable use by Muslim users* (**Report No. 2360/1/15**) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.