

Is bottled water a moral issue?

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Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. Thou shalt not . . . drink bottled water?

Rooted in the notion that clean drinking water, like air, is a God-given resource that shouldn't be packaged and sold, a fledgling campaign against the bottling of water has sprung up among religious groups.

And though the campaign is at a relative trickle and confined mostly to left-leaning religious groups, activists hope to build a broad-based coalition to carry the message that access to water should not be restricted to those who can afford it.

Cassandra Carmichael, director of eco-justice programs for the National Council of Churches, said she has noted an increasing number of religious groups that consider the bottling of water a wrongful—perhaps immoral—act. “We’re just beginning to recognize the issue as people of faith,” Carmichael said.

In October, the National Coalition of American Nuns, a progressive group representing 1,200 U.S. nuns, adopted a resolution asking members to refrain from purchasing bottled water unless necessary.

Likewise, Presbyterians for Restoring Creation, a grassroots group within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), launched a campaign in May urging individuals to sign a pledge against drinking bottled water and to take the message to their churches.

The United Church of Christ, partnering with the National Council of Churches, produced a documentary, *Troubled Waters*, that looks at the dangers of water privatization around the world, including the bottling of water for sale in poor areas. The documentary aired on ABC television in October.

In the developing world, Carmichael said, water is being sold as a commodity where the resource is scarce. On the rationale that bottling water takes water resources away from the poor, the environmental issue has become an important one for people of faith, Carmichael said. "The moral call for us is not to privatize water. Water should be free for all."

Americans consume more bottled water than any other type of beverage except carbonated soft drinks, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, a New York-based research organization. In 2005, Americans drank about 7.5 billion gallons of bottled water, a 10.4 percent increase from 2004. The U.S. leads the world in bottled-water consumption.

At the same time, one-third of the world's population lives in water-stressed conditions. That proportion will double by 2025, according to a 2006 United Nations report on water scarcity. Water is scarcest in arid developing countries plagued by drought and pollution, such as South Africa, where agriculture fuels demand.

Sister Mary Ann Coyle, the National Coalition of American Nuns board member who introduced the measure against bottled water, said the fear is that as water becomes a commodity, access to it will no longer remain a right for all people.

Coyle regards drinking bottled water as a sin. She said that in the U.S., people are paying for bottled water when the country's tap water is among the safest in the world.

"The use of bottled water in the U.S. is more a lifestyle issue than a necessity," Coyle said. "In this country, we should do more to push [avoidance of] bottled water unless we need it."

But Stephen Kay, spokesperson for the International Bottled Water Association, said targeting bottled water among the hundreds of other products that use water will not lead to long-term solutions in poor areas. Arguing that bottled-water providers are actually a minimal user of ground water, Kay said better solutions would come from determining how to get clean water into areas struggling with access. "It narrows the focus with what I imagine is good intent," he said.

The Coca-Cola Company, a leading provider of bottled water with its Dasani brand, recognizes the serious nature of water issues and is working on several community initiatives in developing countries, said spokesperson Lisa Manley. "From our

perspective, water solutions require the efforts of multiple organizations, nonprofits, governments, community organizations and the like,” Manley said. “I hope we’d work toward the same purpose of making safe water accessible to all people of the world.”

Nonetheless, Rebecca Barnes-Davies, coordinator of Presbyterians for Restoring Creation, said she hopes that boycotting bottled water would apply pressure on companies marketing it to act responsibly in the U.S. and the rest of the world. – *Rebecca U. Cho, Religion News Service*