



*Purity*

My first 'ah-ha' moment related to what purity means for my local friends in Indonesia was when a neighbour's child messed on the floor in my house. After the mother cleaned it up she asked me 'what is your rule for how many times you need to wipe something?' While I was still thinking 'hot water, ammonia, baking soda, scrubbing brush, till the germs are gone etc.' she said 'three times, I wiped your floor three times, and it is okay now.' Okay for what? I was thinking in terms of cleanliness, getting completely rid of the mess and smell and germs. She was talking in terms of restoring my floor to being acceptable, able to be used for '*sholat*' prayers or reading the Al-Qu'ran. One thing I have learnt recently from discussions with a variety of Muslim friends about purity is that, like some Jewish thinking about regulations in the Torah, the rules are about keeping or making a person or place acceptable to meet God, specifically to carry out the five obligatory daily set prayers or read/hold the Al-Qu'ran.

A person able to pray the obligatory prayers, or a place which can be used for such prayer, is called pure or clean, usually using the usual Indonesian word for clean, '*bersih*' or the Arabic and therefore religious word '*tahir*'. This ritual purity is only tangentially related to cleanliness however. And it is not directly related to sin either. Nor to holiness. The connections between these concepts are well worth exploring as we seek to open minds to Jesus being the fulfillment of cleanliness laws (Mt 5:17) and the one who washes us clean from sin (Heb 10:10).

What is Muslim understanding of purity related to? In all human cultures there is a focus on boundaries. Life-cycle events occur when a person crosses a boundary from one part of life to another - birth, puberty, marriage, motherhood, death. The topic of purity is related to this universal preoccupation or interest in

boundaries. Muslims are ritually pure when things such as bodily fluids are in their right places and they are '*najis*' (Indonesian from Arabic) when such things are escaping the boundaries. Hence sexual relations, menstruation, nocturnal emissions, giving birth and many other normal activities cause a person to be ritually impure and forbidden to perform the obligatory daily prayers until extra ablutions have been done. My understanding is that these extra ablutions, called '*mandi wajib*' or '*mandi junup*' take place as soon as possible after the bodily fluids have stopped flowing. Lesser issues such as passing wind and passing urine are dealt with by the normal '*wudhuh*' ablutions always undertaken before the obligatory prayers.

All religions reveal this human cultural focus on 'in the right place' to some extent or other. Is it that Allah needs his followers to be 'pure' in this ritual and physical sense before he can or will hear their prayers? 'Is he that small?' one of my informants commented.

My understanding is that this is more about us, what we as humans feel we need to do to prepare ourselves to come to God in prayer. And if I have learnt nothing else from Islam it is that faith is carried out in the body. God/Allah is Spirit, but graciously meets us where we are, in our body-mind life. Hence in all religions places for prayer are set aside, people get into their 'Sunday best' or special garb, sit, stand, kneel and much more.

As Christians we would say that the only reason we can draw near to an unutterably holy God at all (Hebrews 10:22) with washed or unwashed bodies is because of the body of the one He sent. We wouldn't want to underestimate the importance of body. But we would want say two things.

Firstly in speaking to my local friends, the, what we might consider to be 'man-made laws' of purity, are obviously a huge burden. Women in particular are discouraged by the side-effects of not being ritually pure. It's bad luck to miss out

on obligatory prayers, and their normal daily routines are messed up for days at a time. Being a woman increases the difficulty of spending time with God/Allah in prayer. A particular friend said she hadn't done any set prayers for five years: between giving birth a couple of times, menstruating, breast-feeding, cleaning up messy babies, she had never been in an acceptable state. One year her mother looked after her children so she could carry out part of the fasting month. A Muslim is allowed to pray spontaneous prayers, or chant '*zikir*' or repeat memorized verses even when not ritually pure, but few avail themselves of this.

Two believers from a Muslim background that I know well have chosen different ways forward. One still does the five obligatory daily prayers and tacks on personal prayer and Bible reading after that. She follows the purity rules she grew up with. The other one is not interested in adapting the five daily prayer times to her faith in J. Rather she luxuriates in praying in her pyjamas, anywhere, anytime with no thought of any ritual ablutions.

I love telling the story of Jesus touching and healing the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. She was '*najis*', and Jesus became '*najis*' when he touched her. In touching her he healed her and restored her to her community and her religious/prayer life. This was a '*najis*' that she couldn't wash away with ablutions. She was made pure after many years of waiting fruitlessly for her body to right itself.

Secondly, ablutions don't go far enough. They don't deal with dirty thoughts or sinful actions. Only God can forgive. The story of the Pharisee and the sinner going up to the temple to pray is useful here. God heard the sinner's prayers although he was not ritually pure and would have been considered '*najis*'. The Pharisee was ritually pure but full of sinful pride. We may want to say that our purity/cleanliness is far short of God's glory and standard that we are never going

to be able to reach it It may be helpful to talk about the many things that keep us from God. We could talk about heart-purity being at least as important as body-purity. We may want to discuss how humans are ashamed before God. I like to take a clean cracked glass and offer to fill it up for my guests with water. When they look askance at the cracked glass I say our lives are like that. We can clean them physically, fill them up with good deeds, with prayers, but our lives are cracked and flawed. Our lives need to be fixed first, and J has done that for us.

We can follow the example of Jesus interacting with the Pharisees. They were also bound up in faith-destroying rules. J said 'I have come to fulfill the law' (Mt 5:17). Jesus purifies us once and for ever in the water of baptism. He is the living water (Jn 7:17).

On the other hand we may want to be seen to wash our hands before reading the Bible. On one level purity laws are about taking God/Allah seriously. Along with a mental and verbal '*niat*' (intention), Muslims through various kinds of ritual ablutions put aside the messy parts of life and set themselves to pray. It is possible to commend this human desire to prepare for prayer, while encouraging deeper discussion about what God requires.

We would want to go on to talk about purification from sin. We will want to look beyond the issue of purity to what can make us acceptable to God now and forever. Only God himself is able to do that, and He has done it, in Jesus.