Ritual purity and defilement: What place does it have?
Abstract
This paper discusses the nature of ritual purity and how it functions within Islam, particularly in relationship to the daily life of Muslim women. A look at the purity code in Leviticus and at purity issues in the New Testament offers a background to the attitude of Jesus and the New Testament writers to ritual purity. The paper suggests that the major New Testament discussions about purity and defilement were to do with the clean and unclean food laws, which together with circumcision, created a (horizontal) barrier between Jews and Gentiles that needed to be removed. However the ritual purity code which governs our (vertical) approach to God finds its fulfilment in baptism into Jesus’ atoning death: and in Jesus, purity rather than defilement, becomes contagious. A response to Muslim women’s conversations around ritual purity can affirm its importance, and point to its fulfilment in the Messiah.

Life encounters

Allah loves those who purify themselves (Qur’an al-Taubah 9:108)

It was past midnight, in a block of flats in a poor quarter of Cairo. A woman was calling out for her sister, who lived in an apartment above her, to come – she was having a miscarriage and she urgently needed help. Everyone in the building could hear her, but it seemed an age before her sister appeared at her door. Next day, the
friend who lived next door asked the sister, “Why did you take so long? We could all hear her calling for help!”

The sister explained, “I’d just been sleeping with my husband. If I’d gone out in that state and anything had happened to me, I wouldn’t have got to Paradise.” So in the middle of a winter night she had got up, poured several buckets of cold water over herself – and then felt able to go down to help her sister.

What would you have said to her?

_Allah loves the repentant and those who purify themselves (Q al-Baqarah 2:222)_

Hibbert describes standing outside the meeting place for a church of people of Muslim-background “when a young (unmarried) man arrived late and came up to me. After greeting me, he whispered in my ear that he had just had sexual intercourse, but that he had not washed. Could he go into the meeting, he wondered. He did not think so, and I realised that in his mind the problem was not the illicit sex itself, but the fact that he had not washed to ritually remove the uncleanness before approaching God.”¹

How would you have answered his question?

_The Qur'an: a Book well-guarded, which none can touch but the purified (Q al-Waqi'ah 56:79)_

I was visiting a Muslim friend in hospital. As we talked, I commented on the Qur’an on her bedside locker, and asked if she was reading it. “I can’t,” she told me, “I've

¹ Hibbert, Defilement, 2008.
got my monthly period. And you? Do you read your Bible when you’re menstruating / impure?!”

What would you have said?

The requirements of ritual purity shape the daily lives and pious practices of Muslim women and men.

**Ritual purity - what is it about?**

For people in western societies, talk of purity usually evokes the idea of moral purity, or perhaps cleanliness and antibacterial hand washing soap. And a group of western women understood discussion of the significance of menstruation and purity only in terms of ‘mother-daughter’ talks. From a context where purity is defined in terms of morality or cleanliness, how can ritual purity be understood?

We could begin by taking a few moments to list the substances which, if we touched them, would make us feel the need to wash immediately before doing anything else: and even after washing would still feel somewhat ‘unclean’. Typically when I ask people about such substances, the lists include faecal matter or urine, pus, vomit, sexual discharge and blood - particularly menstrual blood. Reflecting on our own reactions helps to give some sense of the ways in which purity and defilement is commonly experienced as embodied, or felt reality, rather than an issue understood in terms of moral purity or bacteria.²

In eliciting such a list, we notice that that they include a number of bodily substances - in other words, things that are normally in the body, and when we encounter them outside the body we experience them as dirty or defiling.

² For discussion of existing unwritten purity codes in contemporary western society, see deSilva (2000:244-5) and Malina (2001:162-5).
Sometimes dead bodies (things that should be alive and now are not) are included: or slugs (which seem to cross the boundaries between animal and reptile and insect without neatly fitting into any of them). This sense of dis-ease or disgust around displaced substances was neatly described by anthropologist Mary Douglas in her famous definition of ‘dirt’ as ‘matter out of place’ - matter which contravenes the ‘natural’ order by existing in a different place or state to that in which it should belong.

We also note that this list includes many substances categorised as defiling within Judaism and within Islam. This paper will explore categories of defilement and purity in Islam, and then look at Torah regulations before we see the response of Jesus and the early church to issues of impurity.

**Defilement and purity in Islam**

*Hadith (Traditions)*

- Cleanliness is half of faith. (Book #002, Hadith #0432, Sahih Muslim)
- The key to Paradise is prayer and key to prayer is purification. (Chapter #1, Hadith #4, Book of Taharah, Sunan at-Tirmidhi)

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\(^3\) Douglas notes that such a definition “implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.” (1966:36)

\(^4\) In a later publication Douglas discusses how the social body reflects how the physical body is perceived, so that a social system concerned with social boundaries implies a concern for bodily boundaries, requiring strong body control (1970:72, 78ff). The physical body then becomes a map for social organisation, for relationships and hierarchy within the wider social community.

\(^5\) ahadith.co.uk/chapter.php?cid=34
If anyone performs the Wudu completely his sins will come out of his body, even coming out of his nails (Book #002, Hadith #0476, Sahih Muslim)

My people will be summoned on the day of resurrection with shining faces, hands and feet from the marks of ablution. If anyone of you can extend his brightness, let him do so (Book #4, Hadith #138, Sahih Bukhari)

The hadith abound with references to ablutions, or related terms such as purity or cleanliness. These are developed into detailed rules of practice by scholars of jurisprudence (fiqh) enumerated in multiple books. And these rules determine whether or not Muslims can participate in routine acts of piety, gaining merit towards the hereafter: such as ritual prayer (salah), holding the Qur’an to read it, and fasting.

The Arabic word for purity is taharah (also used as a synonym for circumcision), and its opposite is defilement, najasah. There are two categories of defilement, minor and major (Q al-Ma’idah 5:6).

**Minor defilement (hadath) is caused by the following activities:**

- Passing wind, urine or faeces
- Vomiting
- Sleeping or losing consciousness (in which case some of the previous activities might occur without the person being aware of them)
- Non-menstrual vaginal discharge, secretion from the penis

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* This verse (Q 5:7 in some translations) describes first the washing (wudu’) before salah prayer for minor defilement: and then the requirement for purification (ghusl – full washing) for those in a state of janaba (major defilement). It also details the tayammum cleaning with earth, if there is not water.
- Touching women
- Emission of blood or pus from the body,
- Touching one’s sexual organs
- Touching anything that is unclean: this includes urine, faeces, semen, blood, vomit, pus, corpses; dogs and pigs; intoxicating drinks. For all Shi’ites, non-Muslims are unclean, including People of the Book (Q Al-Taubah 9:28).  
- Kilinc adds ‘Laughing aloud’ to the list of defiling activities (2011:50)

The person who becomes impure is prohibited from participation in ritual prayer, from touching the Qur’an or going around the Ka’bah (sacred stone at Mecca); and requires ritual washing (wudu’) to regain a state of purity.

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7 From Q Al-Ma’idah 5:6.
8 Dehqani-Tafti describes his family’s reaction after he became a Christian: “At home I was like one ‘unclean’, not allowed to eat with them from the same dish. Yahya (older brother) especially adopted a strange procedure to mark my ‘uncleanliness’. When prayer-time came he would bundle ‘clean’ garments under his arm and ostentatiously go and change into them lest any contact of mine with him or his other clothes had contaminated him.” (2000:37)
9 Safran (2003) examines debates by Maliki scholars about whether Christians are polluting. Some suggest that non-Muslims are banned from mosques (al-Taubah 9:17-18).
10 From al-Waqi’ah 56:78-79
11 Washing hands, feet, and face, and rinsing out the mouth, ears and nostrils before praying. This must be repeated before each time of salah, unless nothing has occurred to defile the individual since their last ablution.
12 Douglas’s (1966) understanding of pollution as derived fundamentally from boundary transgression (‘dirt is matter out of place’) has been challenged by recent writers as not being applicable in detail to Sunni purity laws: see Gauvain’s discussion of Reinhart, Maghen and Katz’s work (2005). However al-Ghazali’s [d.505/1111] explanation of the impurity of various body excretions supports Douglas’s general theory.
The steps and order of wudu' are carefully prescribed:

- Make intention, and say 'Bismillah' ('In the name of God').
- Wash hands to wrists, three times.
- Rinse mouth and nostrils out, each three times.
- Wash the whole face three times.
- Wash the arms to the elbow three times.
- Wipe the whole head once.
- Wipe the ears.
- Wash both feet to the ankles 3 times.


_Wudu’_ is required in order to do _salah_, or to go around the Ka’ba. And it is desirable to do it before touching or reciting the Qur’an, before _du’a_ (supplication), going to bed to sleep, before each of the five daily prayers, even if your purity has not been broken, and having intercourse with your spouse.

**Major defilement (_janabah_) is incurred through**

- Menstrual flow
- Emission of sexual fluid
- Sexual intercourse
- Childbirth
- Post-birth bleeding

These preclude the person from _salah_, holding the Qur’an and circumambulating the Kaa’ba, as with minor defilement; and also from fasting. Some authorities hold that it also prohibits entering a mosque, and reciting the Qur’an. It requires a complete bath (_ghusl_) to restore purity. _Ghusl_ is also recommended, but not mandatory, before entering Mecca for the _hajj_ or minor pilgrimage (‘_umrah_).

13 Qur’anic exegetes debate the place of Mary, mother of Jesus, and whether she had prophetic status. The purity given to her by God was exceptional, and al-Razi implicates this with “the necessary absence of menstruation in Mary which is also linked to her sinlessness.” (Rippin 2007:268)

Dry ablution (Tayammum: washing with pure sand or dirt) is permissible when there is no access to water, to substitute for wudu’ or ghusl. (Al-Nisa’ 4:43)

**Muslim women and purity**

I found the subject of ritual purity to be a frequent part of Muslim women’s discussions in domestic gatherings, sandwiched among recipes and household concerns, with its impact on their daily lives and religious practices.

Islam teaches the spiritual equality of men and women, equal in reward/merits and punishment (al-thuwab wa al-‘uqab).

> Verily the Muslims men and women, the believers men and women, the men and the women who are obedient, the men and women who are truthful, the men and the women who are patient, the men and women who are humble, the men and the women who give alms, the men and the women who fast, the men and women who guard their chastity and the men and the women who remember God much, God has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward. (al-‘Ahzaab 33:35)

Khattab comments that “In Islam, religious duties are to be performed by men and women alike,” however “there are some differences in the ways in which men and women are to go about performing these acts of worship, which sisters need to be aware of.” (Khattab 1994:1) Among these differences is the practice of purity. Gauvain, discussing the egalitarian nature of Sunni Islamic purity, notes, “According to Sunni Islam, no human being is deemed purer than any other, and none

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- with the arguable exception of women - is isolated or disadvantaged in any way through purity strategies.” (2005:350, italics added)

While both men and women need to be pure in order to complete their religious duties, the conditions of purity apply differentially. Of the causes of major defilement (listed above), four fifths (80%) apply to women, and only two fifths (40%) to men. Hence we may estimate that for at least a quarter of their lives between about thirteen and sixty years of age (menarche to menopause), women are in a state of ritual pollution, and thus proscribed from participating in pious duties described above. And that is for women who are not engaged at all in sexual relations or childcare. The daily activities of caring for young children involve contact with defiling substances.

Buitelaar notes that although “this only means that women are more often impure but certainly not inherently more impure than men, in practice women tend to be more strongly associated with impurity than men.” (2007:542; also Roded 2008:98-101) Al-Faisal links women’s imputed deficiency with fertility: “Women’s deficiency lies in the fact that she becomes pregnant, gives birth and menstruates. This clearly means that motherhood is the cause of her deficiency! ... these writers

15 The impact of stringent rules of purity may be a partial explanation of the more prominent involvement of Muslim women in rites of life passage, where restrictions of purity are less applicable than they are to rites of intensification such as salah and Friday khutbah attendance.

16 Reflecting on Muslim women in China, Jaschok and Shui write: “Women... are faced with an in-built contradiction: in order to be a good Muslim, they must be good wives and mothers. The Muslim’s duty of increasing her religious knowledge to attain perfect faith, to attend to the daily duties of purification and praying, are in daily life at odds with her inability to reconcile time-consuming domestic duties with the time-consuming task of learning, ablution and prayer.” (2000:28)

17 The urine of a male child is also less impure than that of a female child: defilement is further gender-specific (Gauvain 2005: 354, Note 68).
have forgotten to tell us whether we should deduce from all this that the barren woman is more complete than the one that is fertile, and whether women who do not menstruate are more complete than the other women." (1995:232-3)

The prohibition on pious practices during menstruation is linked to the notable hadith about women’s deficiency in intelligence and religion:

Narrated Abu Said Al-Khudri: Once Allah’s Apostle went out to the Musalla (to offer the prayer) of ‘Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by the women and said, "O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women)." They asked, "Why is it so, O Allah’s Apostle?" He replied, "You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women asked, "O Allah’s Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?" He said, "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?" They replied in the affirmative. He said, "This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn’t it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?" The women replied in the affirmative. He said, "This is the deficiency in her religion." (al-Bukhari, Book #6, Hadith #301; and Sahih-Muslim, Book #001, Hadith #0142)
Shaykah Huda al-Habashi in Syria preferred to interpret the injunction against praying and fasting during menstruation as God’s mercy, rather than indicating women’s deficiency.

*Now fasting and salah are tiring and exhausting and the woman during her monthly period loses a lot of her blood and her time; and fasting and even salah becomes extra exhausting, and so she isn’t ready to pray and the blood which issues from her is unclean. But this matter is to do with worshipping God, so during her menstruation she doesn’t pray* (Dale 2016:136).

Women have to determine whether they are in a state of impurity or not, according to the conditions and length of their *hayd* (menstruation), and other factors (Anwar 2007:27; Philips 1995). A neighbour in Syria described how she had taken a pill to avoid menstruating during Ramadan: however its impact on her body was severe enough to dissuade her from doing it again. Like most Muslim women, she returned to not observing the fast during her menstrual period, and making up the missed days at another time of the year.¹⁹

Devout women will wear make-up and nail polish only for special occasions, or when menstruating: as face make-up washes off with each ablution and must be reapplied; and nail polish is viewed as a barrier between the water and the person, preventing proper *wudu*. As Wynn comments, “Thus piety is constructed and enacted through bodily practices.” (2007:271)

¹⁹ Fasting outside the month of Ramadan, without the community participation and support, is more challenging (Jansen 2007:274).
Intricate details among the different schools of Islam, determined by medieval male scholars, determine women’s practice of daily piety. *Ahadith* collections include detailed sections on issues of impurity, as do collections of *fatwa*, and multiple *fiqh* classes. There is careful enumeration of the various *najasah*, and of the kinds of water offering different degrees of purity. And for women, there are also scrupulous descriptions of what constitutes states of impurity and purity, particularly with regard to degree and colour of menstrual flow and other bodily emissions, detailed analysis of different conditions of discharge and what pious practices are permitted in each condition.

**Women religious teachers**

Questions around details of bodily discharge are more easily discussed with other women. Ghina Hammoud, a *shaykhah* in Lebanon, told an interviewer:

> Sometimes the women have questions to do with menstruation, or inter-menstrual or post-natal bleeding, on the issue of blood or menses, and they are shy to ask men: and I have experience in this, apart from the *fiqh* books. I have had menses or post-natal bleeding, or been in a condition of janabah, and I can answer them, without shyness, more than a man. Men sometimes get a bit embarrassed.
Her students agreed:

*I want to say that it’s really nice to listen to a shaykhah, because as a woman she feels like I do, she feels for me. A woman’s emotions are different to a man’s. A woman’s composition is not like that of a man. God created each gender with specific composition and feeling. So there are intimate things to do with women that I can only ask a shaykhah, I’d be shy to ask a shaykh. This is the difference. I feel more comfortable asking her questions, for example, on your menses, on bleeding and childbirth, when to do salah, when to stop doing salah, the things to do with religion (Maher 2010; also Minesaki 2012:396).*

One of the benefits of the growth in female religious scholars and teachers is that other women can ask them about such personal details without embarrassment about debating such details in public (mixed gender) space where they don’t belong. Women religious teachers can discuss issues of women’s intimate personal and family life, bringing them into the centre of women’s teaching space (Jaschok 2012:43; LeRenard 2012:125). In doing so, they are able to combine their knowledge of religious sources with their embodied understanding of daily life issues for contemporary Muslim women’s lives, including intimate details pertaining to religious practice.

With the wide-ranging debate and disagreement around defining the finer details of *taharah* (purity) in traditional *fiqh* (jurisprudence),

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20 Maghen, as a generally sympathetic expositor, notes the “internal inconsistency and tortuous abstruseness of *tahara* jurisprudence and the bewilderment it occasions even among its own exponents,” leading us to join them in the conclusive phrase: “wa-Allahu a`lam!” - “and God knows best!” (1999:353-4)
among different schools of opinion is possible on issues such as whether menstruating women can recite some of the Qur’an, and attend the mosque. 

Shaykah Huda al-Habashi explained:

The woman, when she is menstruating, some of the (theological) schools and sayings of the scholars prohibit her entering the masjid, but some others say she can enter for essentials. So for me, coming to learn is essential; for others, it’s not so essential that they always come and they don’t safeguard learning sessions or worry too much about them; such a person would say that she wouldn’t come during her menses. But for those who are never absent and who safeguard and follow (the sessions) with us, for such a one you could say that coming to the mosque is essential. We don’t say to the girls to come; neither do we tell them not to come: she needs to decide, it’s her decision.

A woman attending al-Habashi’s lectures told me that coming to the mosque during one’s menstrual period depended partly on the time and whether men were present or not, adding “some scholars say it is permitted and some say it isn’t, so

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21 Philips cites al-Bukhari and Ibn Taymiya to support the position that a menstruating woman can recite a Qur’anic verse (1995:16-17).

22 A commonly mentioned Hadith in the literature in support of menstruating women attending the mosque is: ‘A’ishah said: The Messenger of Allah once told me to get his mat from the masjid and I said, “I am menstruating!” He replied, “Your menses is not on your hands.” (Sunan Abu Dawud vol.1, no. 261 and Sahih Muslim vol.1, no. 587)

you choose what you think.” Another teacher corrected her comment: “It doesn’t depend on the time or on the presence of men except if she means that in the time of the Prophet there was no means to keep clean, but in our times we have more than one means to keep ourselves and the mosque clean.” (Dale 2016:137) This supports Maghen’s reading of impurity derived through the actual najasah (unclean substance) coming in contact with the place or person (1999:379-82). In a contrary ruling, an Australian mosque requires that all women in visiting groups not enter the main (male) prayer space, rather than asking them individually whether or not they are menstruating.

Ritual purity shapes the lives of Muslim women, determining what pious practices they can carry out when. Access to female religious teachers offers women the chance to learn the intricacies of regulations around purity and defilement without embarrassment.

**Judaism**

There are both areas of overlap and also significant differences\(^{24}\) between codes of purity in Judaism and Islam. Chapters 11-15 in the book of Leviticus offer the most detailed description of purity rules in the Torah.\(^{25}\) The first half of chapter 11 deals with clean and unclean foods which the Israelites may or may not eat. The second half of chapter 11 (from verse 24) begins a lengthy discussion of conditions or substances that render the worshipper unclean. They include:

- Corpses (11: also Numbers 11:19-22)
- Childbirth (12)

\(^{24}\) Gauvain 2005: 359.

\(^{25}\) See Tidball 2005:141-186 for a helpful detailed discussion of these chapters.
DeSilva comments that “Defilement and unholiness separated people from contact with the pure and whole God.” So blemished or deformed people could not enter the sanctuary, and blemished or deformed animals could not be offered as a sacrifice to God. DeSilva suggests that defilement or pollution derive from conditions that show individuals’ ‘unwholeness’: this includes skin diseases, bodily discharges and corpses (2000:248, 274).

Purity is regained by washing or by offering the stipulated sacrifice, and may also include the lapse of time (unclean until evening or until the 8th day).

In both Judaism and Islam, emissions from the sexual organs are defiling. And the state of purity required to enter a mosque or hold /read the Qur’an may find parallel in passages such as Exodus 19:14-15, where ritual purity is required of the community before the encounter with God that yields the Ten Commandments; and Isaiah 6:5-7, where the prophet’s lips must be purified in his vision of God’s presence and sending.

Although the laws of clean and unclean animals (Leviticus 11:1-23: also Deuteronomy 14:1-21) are usually grouped with the other laws of purity, it is notable that unlike the rest of the ritual purity laws, transgression of these edicts does not include any process for purification. These food laws have to do with maintaining

26 He cites a quote from Plato’s ‘Laws’: “it is not right for either God or a good person to receive gifts from one who is polluted.” (2000:248, note 12)
community boundaries, limiting table fellowship with non-Israelites (so Daniel 1:8). They ensure that the Israelites will be a people separate from the peoples around them, separated to belong to God (Leviticus 20:25-6, see also 11:44-46). This is the daily life enacting of separateness or segregation, which is also embodied in (male) circumcision (Genesis 17:10-14: 1 Maccabees 1:15).  

So while eating unclean foods is forbidden, this does not incur cleansing rituals of washing or sacrifice, suggesting a different dimension of uncleanness. Neither are substances from the alimentary canal (faeces, urine) included in substances that defile. Neither input nor output of food entail ritual purifying.

**Ritual purity concerns in the New Testament**

Gibson adduces archaeological evidence to suggest a preoccupation with purity among Jews in the early first century CE. He points to the unprecedented number of *miqwa'ot* (pools) to enable immersion for ritual purity, which were built in that time in the basements of private dwellings. He also argues that the Bethesda and Siloam Pools were built not to store rainwater for the city, but rather for the ritual purification needs of the tens of thousands of non-residents who would arrive in Jerusalem three times a year for the annual festivals (2009:64-80).

The same preoccupation fills the pages of the New Testament. The Pharisees challenge Jesus and his disciples around questions of purity (Mt 15:2, 23:25ff, Mk 7:1-5, Lk 11:38f). Lepers are ‘cleansed’ rather than ‘healed’, reflecting the Torah definitions of uncleanness: and are sent to complete the purification ritual at the temple described in Leviticus (Mt 8:1-4, 10:8, 11:5, Mk 1:40ff, Lk 4:27, 5:12ff, 7:22, 13:11-14). ‘Unclean spirits’ is a synonym for ‘evil spirits’ or ‘demons’ (Mt 10:1, 27 Also deSilva 2000:257.
And the stories of the demoniac(s), Jairus’s daughter and the woman with a flow of blood (Mt 8 & 9, Mk 5 and Lk 8), incorporate a number of categories of ritual uncleanness - unclean spirits, tombs, Gentile territory and pigs, vaginal bleeding and a dead body. So too the story of the Syrophoenician woman (Mt 15:22, Mk 7:24ff) combines together the defilement types of Gentiles, Gentile territory and unclean spirits. The centurion demonstrates his respect for Jesus and Jewish customs by not requiring him to enter the centurion’s house (Mt 8:5ff, Lk 7:1ff). Other people who would have been unclean for observant Jews include Samaritans (Lk 10:25ff, John 4), and tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:10ff, 11:19, Mk 1:15ff, Lk 19:7).28 And the story of the Good Samaritan draws its tension further through issues of (seeming) corpses and priestly purity requirements (Lk 10:25ff - Lev 21:1—6).

John’s Gospel shows the contemporary concern for purity in the description of the large containers of ablution water, which is turned to wine (Jn 2:5ff). Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in sacrificial servanthood is a ritual of enacted purity that takes the place of the Communion meal described in the synoptic gospels. And the discourse on the vine (Jn 15:1ff) talks in terms of us being pruned/cleaned (kathairo) through Jesus’ word. John’s description of the events of the crucifixion reflect Jewish concerns for purity, as Pilate comes out to see the Jewish leaders rather than having them defile themselves on the eve of the Passover festival in

28 DeYoung comments that “Some religious leaders of Jesus’ day defined their ‘congregation’ by who was excluded from membership. There were long lists of those who could not meet the definition. Such lists included women, Samaritans, Gentiles, individuals with criminal records, anyone who was disabled or sick, tax collectors, and those considered ‘sinners.’ Also those with certain occupations were not counted as worthy: camel drivers, sailors, herdsmen, weavers, tailors, barbers, butchers, physicians, businesspeople, and many others. The only people who qualified were healthy males of pure Hebrew ancestry who held respectable jobs and followed all the laws of the religion.” (2003:16)
coming into see him (Jn 18:28–9, 38; 19:13): and the leaders don’t want to leave the corpses hanging on the cross over the Sabbath (Jn 19:31).

Purity rituals are also described. At the beginning of life, the circumcision of John and of Jesus on the eighth day after their birth is a purification ritual, and Jesus’ parents offer the required purification offering at the temple (Lk 1:59, 2:21: Lk 2:22-24 - see Lev 12). 29 Paul knows he is likely to find a Jewish worshipping community in Philippi beside the river, which gives easy access for ablutions30 (Acts 16:13). And in Acts 21:21-26, we see Paul undertaking the rites of purification, and paying for others to do so.

The New Testament writers continue to use the language of purity and defilement in describing the Messiah and what He has done. He is holy and undefiled (Heb 7:26); and Peter tells the crowd that God did not let his Holy One experience corruption (Acts 2:27- Ps 16:10). Salvation is described in terms of being sanctified / purified (Titus 2:14, 1 Pet 1:2, 1 Cor 6:11, Heb 9:13-14, 9:22 - Lev 17:11, Heb 10:22).

Issues of purity and defilement were a major part of consciousness and conversation for the early church.

**Ritual and moral purity**

There has been a tendency for western Christians, when confronted with ritual purity laws, to discount them as insignificant, something that has been rescinded in the New Testament. The description of the Leviticus purity chapters by one commentator is perhaps extreme, but not uncharacteristic of the response of many Bible students encountering Leviticus 11- 15: “These chapters are of course very

29 Commentators differ as to whether the intriguing ‘their’ purification in Luke 2:22 refers to Mary with Joseph, or Mary and Jesus. The combination of purity rituals in Lev 12 would suggest the latter reading.

30 So also many mosques are built adjacent to rivers or canals.
unattractive and in part decidedly repulsive. They are mainly of interest to the anthropologist and sociologist. ... (They are) meaningless and irrelevant...” (Davies 1962:120-121). While Levitical prescriptions may read strangely to western eyes through the lens of a post-enlightenment separation of the physical and spiritual worlds, they map more compellingly onto the worldview of Muslim and other non-western cultures, where issues of ritual purity remain central to daily life and interactions. DeSilva reflects contemporary western thinking in his argument that the Christian separation of moral purity from ritual/cultic law is based on the fact that: “Christians claimed the Old Testament to be authoritative, yet regarded a large portion of its legislation - the cultic law - to be irrelevant.” (2000:255)

What then is the response of Jesus’ and the New Testament writers to the purity code of Leviticus? In Torah, cultic and moral purity were linked. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ questions about purity challenged their man-made additions to the purity code of the Torah. At the same time, he affirmed a focus on purity defined more particularly in terms of moral attitudes and behaviour (Mt 15:10ff, and especially Mk 7:15-19). We see this also in the epistles, describing impurity in terms of moral unrighteousness (Rom 1:24, 6:19, 2 Cor 7:1, Gal 5:19, Eph 4:19, 5:5, Col 3:5, 1 Thes 4:7, Rev 21:27): and purity or cleansing likewise in ethical moral behaviour (2 Cor 6:6, Phil 1:10, 4:8, 1 Tim 4:12, 5:2, 2 Tim 2:21, 1 Pet 2:22).

**Clean and unclean food**

We find that a closer examination of New Testament teaching challenges an easy dismissal of ritual purity laws. The specific purity rules that Jesus countermanded are those rules ensuring separation between Israelites and others - the food laws of Leviticus 11:1-23. These are the regulations that, with circumcision, were about maintaining the purity of the nation among the surrounding peoples, rather than
ritual purity before God. Most significantly, these are the regulations that did not mandate a purification ritual if they were broken, suggesting that while they described substances as unclean for eating, they were not in the same category of defilement as those substances and conditions described in the subsequent text (Lev 11:24-15:33). Mt 15:10ff and Mk 7:14 then are not to do with ritual purity and defilement as much as they are about food laws that ensure communal separation. And we see the same issue in Peter's heavenly vision in Acts 10:9-16: the vision about clean and unclean food is Peter's preparation for his visit to a Gentile house (Acts 10:28), and the subsequent baptism of that household in the Holy Spirit and water, incorporating Gentiles into the nascent community of Christians.

The two most prominent issues that Paul returns to in his epistles are circumcision and food laws/table fellowship, issues at the heart of the unity of the new Body of Christ (Rom 14:14ff, 1 Cor 8:1ff, 10:25ff, Col 2:16ff, 1 Tim 4:3). The separation of Jewish people, embodied in circumcision and laws of clean and unclean food, was so deeply graven into Jewish thinking that it had to be dealt with again and again. So despite Peter's vision, Paul had to challenge him later in Antioch with the essentialness of table fellowship (Gal 2:11ff). It is these purity markers of Jewish separation from Gentiles that have been broken down in Christ at the cross (Eph 2:11ff), initiating what Andrew Walls has described as ‘the Ephesians moment’ of reconciliation between the two groups (2002:72-81).31

31 DeSilva (2000:296) argues that the concern in the Torah for defilement through disruptions of the physical body is paralleled in the New Testament in its concern for what disrupts relationships within the church as the body of Christ (2 Cor 12:20-21, 2 Tim 2:21-23 are examples of lists of sins of the physical body and of relationships).
Ritual purity through Christ Jesus

What then are we to do with the rest of the Torah purity code, its prohibitions and its requirements for ritual washing or sacrifice? Have they been annulled in the New Testament? But Jesus does not deal in annulment or abrogation of the Torah and the Prophets, but rather in fulfilment (Mt 5:17). Instead, in Jesus, we see contagion reversed, and purity fulfilled.

As Jesus comes into contact with situations or substances that are defiling, we see that, rather than defilement being contagious, through Jesus, purity becomes contagious. He touches lepers and is not defiled, but the lepers are cleansed. He touched dead bodies and does not become unclean, rather the corpses come back to life. Encountering the holiness of God Incarnate, unclean spirits are cast out, and a bleeding woman is healed. He sits with sinners and is not polluted, but sinners and Gentiles are invited into repentance and a life of faith and holiness. The New Testament is not a denial of ritual purity but a reversal of direction: impurity is not passed on to Jesus, but rather purity is transmitted from him.32

The sacrificial system in the Torah finds its fulfilment in the sacrifice of Christ, once and for all. It has not been annulled but rather completed, for once the sacrifice of Christ has been made, there is no need or place for any further sacrifice. In the same way the purity code in the Torah finds its fulfilment in Jesus. Entrance into God’s community under the old covenant was through (male) circumcision, which was described in terms of purity. Entrance into God’s community in the new covenant in Christ is through baptism, again a ritual of purity (a ritual of inclusion

32 We see a suggestion of holiness as contagious in the Old Testament in Ezekiel 44:19 and 46:20. A parallel may be the way in which the mission of Israel is primarily attractive or centripetal in the Old Testament, but the direction is reversed and the mission of the Church is increasingly outgoing or centrifugal in the New Testament.
equally for women and men). In his death Christ became unclean, by being crucified, in order to purify us by his own blood (Heb 13:11-13 - Dt 21:22f). So as we are baptised into the blood of Christ’s atoning death (Eph 5:26; Tit 2:14, Heb 1:3, 7-9, 7:26, 9:13-14, 10:19, 1 Pet 1:19, 1 Jn 1:7-9, Rev 7:14), ritual purity, with its requirements of washing and sacrifice, is completed. It has not been annulled: rather, once we have been baptised there is no need or place for any further purification ritual in order to approach God in prayer, in the gathering place of His community, or in receiving His Word. The purity requirements have been completely fulfilled - not by our acts of ritual purification, but by what Jesus has done.

Imitations

How as Christians do we respond now to questions of ritual purity?

The Eastern Orthodox churches retain some tenets regarding ritual purity in relation to women. While these may differ in detail among different Orthodox churches (as among Sunni schools), menstruating women usually do not join in taking the Eucharist. If either women generally or menstruating women in particular do not enter behind the iconostasis to the inner area behind, where the consecrated Eucharist is contained. These churches continue to hold to a (albeit reduced) code of ritual purity. Women in some contemporary indigenous African and Asian churches also face role restrictions on the basis of ritual purity (Crumbley 2003).

In contemporary western churches ritual purity is generally excluded, with a focus purely on moral purity. It is assumed and even taught that ritual pollution is unimportant and irrelevant: issues of ritual purity and pollution have no place within the new Covenant. However this position does not explain on what basis the ritual

33 Some Middle Eastern Protestant women followed the same restrictions regarding Communion.
purity code no longer applies: or why (western) Christianity differs not only from nearly every other faith with regard to issues of purity and pollution, but also from Judaism from which it came.

Both positions underrate the presence and action of Jesus Christ in regard to laws of ritual purity and pollution. Jesus is present and powerful now through the Holy Spirit, as in his incarnation, to reverse the contagious direction of defilement. And it is through the ritual washing of baptism into Christ that the Christian is completely purified once and for all to participate in every act of piety.

How then do we respond to our Muslim friends when they discuss questions of ritual purity and its implications in daily life and pious practices? When their whole life has been defined by practices of purity in approaching God, are we to say that it no longer matters: purity is only concerned with the heart and not with bodily rituals? A closer reading of the New Testament suggests otherwise.

Rather, we can affirm with our Muslim friends that purity matters, and matters ultimately in approaching God. The Good News is that as we come to Christ, His purity is so contagious that we are purified, healed, given new life. In baptism into Christ we are so completely purified once and for all that we are always in a state of ritual purity, able to fast, to pray and to read Christ’s cleansing Word.

Romans 8:1-2 encourages us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the law of sin and death that bound us. When we read the stories such as those in Mark 5 and Luke 8, stories dealing with unclean spirits, tombs, pigs, Gentiles, a bleeding woman and a dead body, they tell us of purity and defilement. If the epistle to the Romans tells us how we are set free from condemnation, these narratives tell us about how we are set free from defilement. As we hear them, we realise that
whatever condition of defilement we are in - whether from what we have done, or from what others have done to us - however impure we feel - we can be absolutely assured that there is no defilement from which Christ does not wholly purify and set us free.

And this is Good News indeed.
References


