

# Introduction

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What is purity? Is it synonymous with holiness and/or cleanness, as many people assume? Why was it so prominent in the ancient world—in Greece and Rome, in Judaism and Christianity—and how did it become so marginal in ours? Purity is a central theme in many antique texts and in many parts of Jewish and Christian Scripture relating to the priesthood and liturgy, ethics, and the intellectual and spiritual life. Yet in modern times, purity seems almost wholly associated with various kinds of conservative agendas. At the very least then, there are interesting stories in the history of ideas to be told. Yet the questions naturally arise: what has been lost and gained in this process? Is it worth trying to recover purity as a concept or is it better left where it now is at the edges of discourse?

In order to understand a concept it is not enough to produce a stipulative definition, important though they are for specific argumentative purposes. Attention must be paid to how the concept has been used in different contexts and periods of history. Only this will enable us to see whether that concept can do similar work in our own context or, if not, what other language may be used instead, and what differences result from the change in language, or whether the whole conceptual apparatus is better left behind. Whilst purity is present in many religions, this volume focuses only on Christian theology and biblical interpretation and the ancient Jewish theology of the Hebrew Scriptures. As such it lacks other philosophical and religious perspectives, but it makes a beginning to answering some of these questions about purity by taking soundings from different facets of

theology and Scripture. Indeed, various common themes emerge from the essays and, at the same time, various disagreements.

Christianity obviously inherited and transformed purity ideas from ancient Judaism. One of the more notable results of several of the present biblical essays is the distinction between purity and holiness in many biblical texts. It is common to assume holiness and purity are synonyms and read this back into biblical and early ecclesial texts, but several of the essays here show this is mistaken. For the ancients, holiness and purity were certainly linked but they were not the same.

For modern readers, purity may appear intuitively as a metaphor for morality, but in the following biblical essays purity emerges as a category essential to understanding approach to the divine. At this point the question of whether there is any difference between the moral and spiritual becomes central. Whereas some modern thinkers equate the two categories, purity seems to have been one way in which pre-moderns marked their distinction. This difference in intuitions between contemporary and older thought reappears in Ben Kautzer's discussion of sacraments and Joseph W. Cunningham's analysis of the theological-ethical life. Whether purity in these later instances functions as a metaphor or whether it describes some kind of ontological relational or moral state (or a combination thereof), remains a question to be pursued. The distinction between metaphor and ontological state drawn in the previous sentence may however be misleading as a way to approach earlier traditions of thought.

One of the central disagreements about purity is its use for either conservative or progressive purposes. This is nicely brought out by the differences between Leonard Aldea and Susan Dowell. Aldea's gendered language ("man" rather than "humanity," for example) arguably carries the legacy of patriarchal attitudes towards women prevalent in the patristic period, and witnesses to the exclusive uses to which purity can be employed. (The work of Rachel Adler is important in this regard.) Susan Dowell, however, shows that in other contexts purity has been attached to emancipatory or at least progressive movements. One must admit that historically the conservative and exclusive uses dominate the progressive, and are perhaps likely to continue to do so.

The volume begins with two chapters on purity and impurity in the Hebrew Bible generally and the Torah specifically. Mila Ginsburskaya starts the conversation with a systematic and detailed treatment of purity laws and their rationale in the Hebrew Bible. Her typology divides impurity into two main categories: physical impurity that comes from physiological processes of human life and sin-impurity that results from breaking God's commandments. Both physical impurity and sin-impurity could defile an individual

and the sanctuary, while grave sin-impurity pollutes the Land as well. Both types of impurity belong to a single purity system that is void of the dichotomy between ritual and morality, cult and ethics. Ginsburskaya goes beyond Torah in order to explore the rationale behind the purity system from an anthropological perspective. In her view, the notions of sex and cosmic order underpin purity regulations that define boundaries between Israel and her God and the surrounding nations. Thus, the laws of purity serve a dual purpose: (1) to enable relationship between God and people and (2) to define Israel's identity.

Dwight Swanson continues from the point where Ginsburskaya left off: he touches upon the issue of impurity as an activity of demonic forces and explores the relationship between purity and holiness in Leviticus. Though Leviticus uses the vocabulary of *qds* to describe both holiness and purity—highlighting the close relation between the two concepts—they are not identical. Swanson follows the narrative flow of the Pentateuch to demonstrate the difference. Leviticus provides one of the culmination points in the overarching story; it recounts the establishment of Israel's life with the presence of the holy God in her midst. In such a conceptual universe with the Holy of Holies at the center, holiness was required for anyone to be in the presence of YHWH. Swanson sees purity laws in the context of this priestly concern for holiness. Purity regulations were introduced in order to maintain the holiness of the people; holiness requires purification as a prerequisite.

C. E. Shepherd warns his readers from the outset that purity language is largely absent from the prophetic literature. However, he finds purity issues at the friction point between the law and the prophets. He points out that the prophets reinterpret priestly traditions: categories of im/purity are removed from their cultic contexts and used as social indicators of the community's holiness. The prophets envisage purity as the practice of social justice towards marginalized groups: the oppressed, the poor, the fatherless, and widows. Shepherd comes to the conclusion that in the overall context of the Hebrew Bible the prophetic vision of purity—though markedly different from cultic—significantly adds to the single picture of YHWH who requires sacrifices and is capable of mercy.

R. Michael Fox observes that the issues of purity do not captivate scholarly attention in Wisdom literature studies. Traces of purity language can nonetheless be found across the corpus. In Proverbs, the underlying purity concerns can be found in the discussion of sexual relations. The language of im/purity and abominations inheres in descriptions of human behavior and its results. Following the logic of the book of Job, Fox suggests that impurity causes suffering, but one cannot observe an instance of

suffering and assume it is caused by the impurity of the victim. Psalm 50 provides an example of an understanding that corporate purity is important and that it starts with one's own repentance and personal purification both externally and internally.

Arseny Ermakov suggests that the Synoptic Gospels are not interested in purity *per se*; they use the issues of im/purity to illustrate their Christology. Jesus is depicted as the Holy One of God who enlarges the realm of purity and reduces the dominion of uncleanness through inclusion into table fellowship, exorcisms, healings, cleansing, and the forgiveness of sins. In the battle against cosmic powers and uncleanness he constantly crosses the established purity boundaries in a bid to release people from the bondage of evil, restore the holiness and purity of the nation and (re)create the new holy people of God in the last days. Ermakov also notes that purity is a category of restoration in the Synoptics. The Gospels constantly bring the issues of "ritual" and "moral" purity together; however, Jesus prioritizes the purity of heart over the purity of hands.

Kent Brower argues that in John issues of purity are redefined in the light of a distinct Christology. Jesus, the Word incarnate, purifies his followers through his very presence with them. Purity is the appropriate condition of the new people of God since the holy triune God dwells in them and they in God. But cleanliness is not an end in itself; they have been cleansed by the word, and set apart for the mission of God in the world. However, the disciples are called to maintain purity as well: to wash each other's feet, to forgive and be forgiven, confess their sins and be cleansed. Brower concludes that purity in John's Gospel is Christologically-shaped, community-oriented, and mission-driven.

Sarah Whittle looks at the interplay between sanctification and purification in Paul's theology. She carefully argues against the conflation of these categories. Sanctification describes the work of God who consecrates and gives the spirit of holiness to his people. Those who are in Christ and being transformed by the Spirit are the holy ones. Paul goes even further by presenting his community of believers as the dwelling place of the holy God himself. The purification language, on the other hand, is used in the framework of moral imperatives: those in Christ should cease immoral and defilement-generating deeds. Those who are sanctified should maintain their purity by avoiding idolatry, sexual immorality and other sins. Paul roots purification from the defilement of sin in Christ's atoning death and the coming of the Spirit. In this sense, purity is an eschatological rather than a cultic category.

Kevin Anderson notes that, unlike many biblical texts, holiness and purity are used as synonyms in the epistle of Hebrews. Purity/holiness is

the key concept for understanding the epistle's soteriology. In Hebrews, salvation is brought through Christ's identification with humanity and the victory over the defilement of the devil, death, and sin. Christ's once-for-all sacrifice definitively purges the innermost, human conscience, so that people can find themselves in the very presence of God. Sanctification/purification also involves God's *paideia*—the transformation of the character of God's children for ultimate participation in divine holiness. In Anderson's view, Hebrews' eschatological perspective of purity is about life with God himself in the heavenly Jerusalem; in the meantime holiness is reflected in the offering up of one's whole life as a liturgy that is pleasing to God.

The ontological implications of purity are pursued by Leonard Aldea. Aldea's discussion links patristic material with Sergius Bulgakov's contemporary Orthodox theology, showing a marked consistency across time within the Orthodox tradition on this theme. Rather than asking, "what does it mean to be pure?" he asks, "how is it possible to be pure?" and, "how is it that we seem to be pure with God's own sort of purity?" Aldea's investigation has a transcendental form, taking it as read that humanity can achieve purity—in the form of deification—and examining what else must be true about God and humanity for that to be the case. He suggests Orthodox theology regards purity as opening onto the transcendence of the Absolute, towards which humanity should aim.

Ben Kautzer refuses what he regards as the reduction of purity to ethics, a reduction he associates with some earlier liberal Protestant theologians. Instead, he sees purity as relating to the sacramental encounter with God, extrapolated and textured through liturgy and ethics. Purity offers one way of seeing liturgy and ethics as part of a unified whole, a vision common to ancient Judaism as well as more recent theological ethics. Kautzer examines carefully the recent work of Pope Benedict XVI on purity, expanding on his arguments where necessary, in order to explore the connections between sacraments, liturgy, and ethics in the construction of a contemporary Catholic theology of purity.

Joseph W. Cunningham pulls together the disparate references to purity in John Wesley's corpus and finds it to be of major significance in Wesley's thinking and practice. Purity could be considered a synonym for "perfect love," which was at the core of Wesley's practical theology. Cunningham reveals the sort of work purity does in Wesley's theological ethics. He discovers connections between moral agency, intention, vigorous moral practice, and a belief in divine action mediated through the Spirit, all of which is set in relation to early modern debates about determinism and free will. Yet in Cunningham's reading, Wesley's modernism is shaped by a deep grounding in the whole history of the Christian tradition. Wesley's notion

of purity articulates the sense of experiencing God in multiple ways and the human response to this in emotion, desire, will, intellect and action.

Susan Dowell weaves together a history of English Anglicanism and Dissent with a personal-political history of involvement in second wave feminism as a radical political project and a stimulus to investigations into church history and theology. Dowell aligns herself with Marilynne Robinson in the attempt to correct the ignorance surrounding the Puritans, a term which has become almost an insult. She traces connections between Puritan politics and ethics and later emancipatory political movements, including Christian Socialism, abolitionism and feminism. She shows that Puritans made radical demands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—for gender equality (including reassessments of marriage), equal political representation, redistribution, and the consent of the governed—much of which we now take for granted, even though they have not yet been fully realized. Although this politics and ethics are no longer directly tied to the Puritans, having been inherited by several other movements (a fact about which Dowell is not nostalgic), its past is important at the very least as a matter of historical record, but also for the way it enables the interrogation of our own conceptions of equality, representation, gender, and so on. Further, the Puritans combined this politics with a belief in God, a combination that continues to inspire many of those active in churches and politics today.

Andrew Brower Latz identifies contemporary uses of im/purity language in secular and theological discourses in order to discover its dominant contemporary meanings. The examples he finds are largely negative, even dangerous, leading him to conclude the theologian should avoid purity language on the whole, at least for the time being. This is somewhat deliberately provocative in light of the preceding chapters, but raises the question about how or whether replacement language for purity could and should be found. Brower Latz does not wish to censor its use as a personal category, but is wary of its consequences when used on social and political scales, including ecclesiologically.

These essays show, naturally enough, both differences and convergences. This book is no call to reinstate or reinvigorate purity as a central social or intellectual category; nevertheless an investigation into purity repays itself in at least three ways: purity systems continue to be important in some religions and cultures; traces of purity concerns remain even in secular, western cultures; it helps us better understand the past. The altered cultural ground between ancient Judaism and early Christianity and our own time causes transpositions in the meanings, connotations and functions of purity language and practices. Even in secularized Western societies purity language is still present, though demythologized and naturalized. In place

of ritual and moral uncleanness we are more likely to hear of purity as a category of hygiene, food, or ecology, though it crops up in moral discourse too. Boundaries and behaviors are still influenced by such concerns, shifting us into the realm of Foucaultian biopolitics, anthropology, and ethics. Just as the religious origins and history of many ideas and forms of life are essential to their full comprehension, so we hope this volume provides, in addition to studies of biblical and theological materials in their own right, a historical-theoretical context for wider interests.

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