

nach seinem unergründlichen Willen auch, wem er will und bestraft, wen er will (2,284). Der Gedanke der Kompensation von Unreinem durch Reines und Verdienstvolles bestimmt das Denken, weil die Vorstellung des Gerichts mit dem Bild der Waage verbunden ist, auf der nach dem Tod jedes Menschen Gutes und Schlechtes gegeneinander abgewogen werden. Aber weisen nicht gerade die vielen Möglichkeiten von Unterlassungen und großen und kleinen Sünden einerseits und die vielen Alternativen der Reinigung und Kompensation darauf hin, dass in Bezug auf das Gericht eine große Unsicherheit besteht? War die rituelle Reinheit vollständig, die Reue tief genug, die Intention echt? War die Loyalität und Ehrerbietung dem Höchsten gegenüber ausreichend? Wird der Gläubige am Ende beschämt und gedemütigt dastehen oder kann er sein Gesicht wahren, wenn die Hülle der äusserer Reinheit abgetan werden wird?

Manche trösten sich damit, dass der Glaube und die Erfüllung der formalen Pflichten sie letztlich ins Paradies bringen werden, mit Hilfe der Barmherzigkeit Allahs und der möglichen Fürsprache des Propheten. Andere mühen sich mit großen Anstrengungen, das ganze Gesetz bis in die Details zu erfüllen. Für

beide gilt, dass das Leben ein ständiger Wettlauf gegen die Unreinheit ist. Deshalb kommen viele Menschen aus dem Teufelskreis von Hoffnung und Ungewissheit letztlich nicht heraus. Der Mystiker Hasan al Basri hat diese Polarität mit anderem Schwerpunkt so gesehen: „*Hoffnung und Furcht sind die beiden Reittiere der Gläubigen. Die Furcht muss größer sein als die Hoffnung, sonst verdirbt das Herz*“²³. Damit ist ein weiterer Appell an die Selbstdisziplin und das Durchhalten vor dem Hintergrund der Furcht vor Allah ausgesprochen.

Eine Erlösung von außen und auch jede Form der Mittlerschaft erscheint dem Islam nicht akzeptabel, weil der Mensch sich für das Gute entscheiden und die Bewährungsprobe des Lebens selbst bestehen kann. Ganz im Gegensatz dazu gibt es im Christentum nur Erlösung durch Jesus als Mittler. Muhammad hat den Weg des christlichen Glaubens vom Gesetz zur Gnade durch Jesus nicht mitvollzogen, sondern hat dem absoluten Monotheismus und einer Religiosität des eigenen Bemühens den Vorzug gegeben.

²³ Franz Kardinal König, *Der Islam*, in: *Der Glaube der Menschen und die Religionen der Erde*. Hg. v. Franz Kardinal König, Wien: Herder & Co, 1985, S. 264.

The Meaning of Purity for Man's Relationship to God in Islam

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1. Introduction

During my 30 years in Pakistan, I have been able to observe that Muslims

as a whole take their ritual obligations (especially purification) very seriously. This is especially evident in the prayer ritual (in Arabic: *salat*), which after the

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purifying rites follows a strictly prescribed form, but rites of purification also have a role to play in other religious ceremonies. In this connection the question of inner purity arose, although more in written treatments than in actual practice. In the following essay I focus on the significance of purity and impurity and how they affect the life of a Muslim.

I begin by looking at man's relationship to God and ask how human beings know what God expects of them and what form such communication takes. I discuss whether all religions share common views of the fundamental approach to the divine and examine how Muslims express their faith in practice. Finally I discuss what conclusions can be drawn from the forms of the various rituals and attempt to place the concept of purity in the wider framework of judgment and salvation in the perspective of the individual's responsibility before God.

2. Divine-Human Relationship and Communication

All that a Muslim can know of Allah are circumlocutions that attempt to describe the ultimately indescribable. "*Allah is the Absolute, the unique One, utterly transcendent and uncircumscribed by human concepts or imagination*"². The Koran nevertheless also describes Allah as immanent. "*He is the First and the Last, the Outer and Inner and has unlimited knowledge of all things.*" (Surah 57:3) Despite being omniscient and closer to human beings "*than their own carotid artery*" (50:15), he remains for the most part shrouded in his tran-

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Der Islam. Innenansichten der großen Religionen*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997, p. 432.

scendence. It would seem "*as though Islam wishes to eliminate from the consciousness of the faithful any idea that human beings might participate in the divine uniqueness*"³. On the other hand in the Koran God has very clearly revealed the mystery of his will to mankind to enable them to direct their steps aright (7:41) in submission to the divine will. Obedience to God and the prophets thus becomes the decisive criterion for the Islamic way of life and the condition for belonging to the umma, the Islamic community.⁴ The Koran describes human beings as weak and easily tempted by the wiles of the devil, yet they remain God's representative on earth and his good creation (64:3). The believer is capable of fulfilling God's will of Allah, he or she is in God's image and need have no fear of inherited burdens, for "*Islam does not accept that some kind of original sin or fall could be determinative for the essence of humanity*"⁵. On Judgment Day each will answer individually to his creator and receive their just reward (2:281).

Norms and laws of the divine revelation as later incorporated in the sharia, the Islamic law, today prescribe a Muslim's way of life from the cradle to the grave, and rituals performed in religious ceremonies play a surprisingly important role.

³ Smail Balic. *Der Islam*, in: Christen und Moslems in Deutschland, ed. by Ständige Arbeitsgruppe für christlich-islamische Beziehungen und für Kontakte zu andern Weltreligionen. Essen, 1977, pp. 32-45.

⁴ Tilman Nagel. *Geschichte der islamischen Theologie: Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart*. München: C. H. Beck, 1994, p. 33.

⁵ Charles le Gai Eaton. *Der Islam und die Bestimmung des Menschen: Annäherung an eine Lebensform*. Köln: Diederichs, 1987, p. 366.

3. Ritual and Purity – the Approach to the Sacred

Where there is order, there is also disorder, impurity, uncleanness. Where there is impurity, there is also a way of coping with the associated dangers to be eliminated and the impurity removed.⁶

Purity can refer both to inward and external states which are unalloyed and free from compromise. *“It is no abstract concept but rather something to be merited, something precious, something to be bought at the price of acts of abstinence, sacrifice and good works”*⁷. Such acts often take place in a ritual context since purity is a prerequisite for contact with the numinous revered in the cult. *“A new beginning is made with the Godhead”*⁸ so to speak. Most widespread are seasonal renewal rituals designed to restore an original state. Ritual denotes a religious ceremony performed on specified occasions according to a prescribed pattern and governed by strict regulations. It consists of actions and formulae and may involve the use of cult objects.⁹ *“The language of ritual is act”*¹⁰. Sacred ritual acts demand complete concentration free from distraction. Rites may be connected with various calendar seasons or as rites

⁶ Mary Douglas. *Reinheit und Gefährdung: Eine Studie zu Vorstellungen von Verunreinigung und Tabu*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1985, pp. 17-35.

⁷ William E. Paden. *Am Anfang war Religion: Die Einheit in der Vielfalt*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1990, p. 178.

⁸ Jaques D. J. Waardenburg. "Kultische Reinheit," in: EKL, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996³, Vol. 2, p. 1506.

⁹ Bernhard Lang. "Ritual/Ritus," in: *HrwG*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988, Bd. 4, pp.442-458.

¹⁰ Paden. *Anfang. a. a. O.*, p. 119.

of passage mark important events in an individual's life. Rites may take different forms and are often bound to a particular locality. Ritual is to be understood symbolically, not logically, and the connection between act and significance is not always apparent. The following section describes and examines the markedly ritual practices of Islam.

4. The Requirements

As the first pillar of Islam the creed takes pride of place in Islamic piety, since by saying it and meaning it (or, by saying it in the presence of two witnesses) one declares oneself a Muslim. The ibadat or fundamental religious duties are outlined in the remaining four pillars and constitute what characterises a devout Muslim.¹¹ The moral code governs communal life and one's relationship to society and the state.

4.1 Ritual Prayer (in Arabic: *salat*)

“Allah loves those who purify themselves,” says the Koran (2:222), and the hadith, traditional collections of the prophet's sayings, point in the same direction. *“Religion is based on purity. As far as faith is concerned, purity is half the story and the key to prayer”*¹². One of the phrases of the prayer ritual says: *“Make me one who keeps himself pure.”* The ritual ablution restores a person for a brief moment to the primeval state of innocence, so that they *“stand erect before their Creator. The body has been cleansed from yesterday's dirt and the*

¹¹ Emanuel Kellerhals. *Und Mohammed ist sein Prophet: Die Glaubenswelt der Moslems*, Basel: Basileia Verlag, 1961, p. 83.

¹² Farkhanda Noor Muhammad. *Islamiyat for Students*. Lahore: Ferozsons, 1992, p. 107

soul from the contamination of the past”¹³. How is such ritual purity achieved?

By the ritual cleansing procedure (in Arabic: *tahara*), the performed becomes clean before prayer rites. Small impurities (in Arabic: *hadath*) such as defecation and urination call for a partial or limited ablution (in Arabic: *wudu*), while major impurities (in Arabic: *janabah*) such as sexual intercourse and menstruation necessitate complete lustration (in Arabic: *ghusl*), also a prerequisite for being received into the community of Islam. Contamination due to dirt or unclean objects on the body or clothing merely requires washing under clean running water. Should this be unavailable (in Arabic: *tayammum*) earth or sand may be substituted. The goal is ritual purity (in Arabic: *tahir*).

Having completed the purification rites the person praying takes up their position, dressed in clean clothes and facing Mecca, in a clean place, which may be anything from a prayer mat to a rock or of course the mosque. Impurities in the place of prayer (e. g. caused by dirty shoes) must also be cleansed with pure water. Like all important rites, prayer is prefaced by an expression of intent (in Arabic: *niyya*) that one is consciously approaching God with the desire to concentrate on Him.

The prayers themselves consist of recitations in the sacred language of Arabic, punctuated by a ritually set pattern of bowing, kneeling and prostration. *“Through these motions Islamic worship involves not just the soul but also the*

*body”*¹⁴. The ritualized prayers in Islam thus combine *“a strict outward form with high inward quality”*¹⁵. Personal requests (in Arabic: *du’a*), including the plea for the forgiveness of sins, which may be addressed to God at the close of the ritual prayers, are of lesser account.

4.2 Fasting (in Arabic: *saum*)

The 30 days of Ramadan fast is an ascetic renewal ritual taking place in the ninth month of the lunar calendar, the month in which Mohammed received his first revelation (2:181). From dawn till dusk people conscientiously fast and abstain, practising communal self discipline and recalling their religious duties. *“Ramadan is the month of purity in which the virtues blossom and vice is suppressed, a time of special blessing in which according to one hadith the ‘gates of heaven are open and hell’s are closed’”*¹⁶.

Here the ritual aspect is supplemented by an element of reward as expressed in one of Muhammad’s sayings: *“Those who fast in faith during Ramadan and expect a reward from Allah will be forgiven their past sins...”*¹⁷.

4.3 Almsgiving (in Arabic: *zakat*)

Zakat in Arabic means “purify”, so the person giving alms thereby purifies their heart of love of possessions and wealth. Every free adult Muslim is duty bound to

¹³ Eaton. Islam. a. a. O., p. 370.

¹⁴ Mohammed Rasool. As-Salah: Das Gebet im Islam. Köln: Verlag Islamische Bibliothek, 1983, p. 28.

¹⁵ Pierre Rondot. Der Islam und die Mohammedaner von heute. Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1963, p. 107ff.

¹⁶ Mohammad. Islamiat, a. a. O., p. 121.

¹⁷ Abdur Rehman Shad. Do's and Do Not's in Islam. Lahore: Qazi Publications, 1988, p. 27.

give a certain percentage of their assets to the poor, a levy supposed to undergird the Islamic economy by providing security for the indigent and countering the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Whereas God is the object of the other duties, this one underlines one's responsibility towards poor Muslims. Ample rewards are promised those who fulfil this obligation (30:38; 2:262), but punishment awaits those who balk at their social responsibility.

4.4 *The Pilgrimage to Mecca* (in Arabic: *hajj*)

Every Muslim in good health and disposing of the necessary means is supposed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime (3:90). Pilgrims enter Mecca, Islam's most sacred shrine, unpolluted by the presence of non-Muslims, in a state of particular ritual purity to spend ten days of utter devotion to God, participating in rituals emphasizing all Muslims' oneness and equality before Allah. The physical and financial sacrifice involved means pilgrims can expect to be rewarded with the forgiveness of a multitude of sins.

5. The Meaning of Purity in Islamic Mystics

The ascetic mystics of early Islam set great store by the conscientious fulfillment of all religious duties and the associated purification rites. Their goal was by "un-becoming" to remove anything that might stand between man and God¹⁸ and thus finally attain to the mystic union with the divine where God alone fills

¹⁸ Adel Th. Khoury. *Der Islam: Sein Glaube – Seine Lebensordnung – sein Anspruch*. Freiburg: Herder, 1986, pp. 154-157.

heart and consciousness. This led them to struggle for greater inward spirituality against the formalism of orthodoxy, which is again on the increase today.

6. The Bible about Purity

According to the New Testament purification rites are no longer a prerequisite for approaching God, since the Lord looks on the heart. Nothing created is now to be regarded as causing impurity, whether by ingestion or physical contact, a principle summed up by Paul in his affirmation: "*To the pure, all things are pure*" (Titus 1, 15). Where ritual purity no longer has a role to play, the inner contamination of sin comes into focus, since that alone separates man from God. Only faith in the atoning blood of Christ can reconcile a person to God and create the clean heart capable of seeing God. Justification, and with it a pure heart, is imputed in Christ's name to every sinner who freely and personally accepts the message of reconciliation, is baptized, and lives a life in accordance with the will of God. When guilt perturbs one's relationship with God, it may be confessed and cleansed and the relationship restored. Purity is thus a matter of a sinful person's trust in and response to the promises of God, whereby human beings may have a mediating role to play.

7. Purity and Forgiveness of Sin

The concept of purity is characteristic of Islamic law,¹⁹ being first referred to in a sura revealed to Muhammad at the very beginning: "*Keep your clothes clean and keep yourself from idols*" (74:4-5). Ritual

¹⁹ Jacques Jomier. *Bibel und Koran*. Klosterneuburg. Klosterneuburger Buch- und Kunstverlag, 1962, p. 99.

purity is the 'gateway to prayer'. Five times a day Muslims undergo purification rites in order to be able to engage in ritual prayer in the state of primeval purity. The implication is that all human beings are unclean and may only approach God in a pure state. Ritual prayer is thus a daily reminder of Allah, his laws and his desire that all men should honor him with their worship. This divine mandate and its observance in an increasingly godless world mould the Muslim's identity and concept of God. The communal nature of the rite undoubtedly furthers the sense of brotherhood. All remove ritual impurity in the same way and thus indicate that all stand in equal need of it.

Most Islamic cultures are shame rather than guilt-oriented, and since purification rites are predominantly performed in public, outward purity can be something to 'show off', increasing one's prestige as a better Muslim, yet at the same time occluding hidden faults whose exposure could lead to open shame.

Purification rites are merely preparatory to the performance of further rites, reacting to contamination without inducing moral change. *"In Islamic thought ontology is characteristically of marginal significance compared with formalism"*²⁰. There is therefore no logical connection between the contamination and the purification rite in the sense of meaningful cleansing. The use of earth or sand for both minor or major purification rites in place of water implies a symbolic covering of contamination rather than its removal.²¹

²⁰ A. Kevin Reinhard. "Impurity/no danger," in: *History of Religions* (Univ. of Chicago), 30/1990, p. 23.

²¹ Reinhard, ebd. p. 20.

The rites of prayer, fasting and pilgrimage contain no elements pointing to the removal of or atonement for inner contamination in the sense of guilt. Although similar even in finer points of detail, Jewish ritual probed deeper. Beside outward ablution in water, in certain circumstances the priest might be called upon to sanctify or even in the case of serious contamination to officiate at a sacrificial offering. The ritual thus differentiated between the outward ceremony and the source of contamination in the human heart more clearly for Jews than for Muslims, who tend to be bound up with the ritual routine.

Although formal purity and its significance is very much to the forefront in everyday life, inner purity does not go completely unmentioned. The Koran links ritual cleansing with Allah's will for human purity when it affirms that *"Allah will cleanse those who cleanse themselves"* (5:8-9). Theological writings consistently emphasize the connection between inner and outer purity, which Islamic theologians formulate as follows:

- Cleansing the body from physical soiling
- Cleansing the limbs from sins
- Cleansing the heart from evil desires
- Cleansing the soul of all that is not God.²²

Here impurity is unequivocally related to the guilt of sin in a moral and spiritual perspective. As "lovers of God" the mystics sought on their path to mystic union with God through ascetic abstinence to attain to inner purity even while still on earth.

²² A. J. Wensinck; J. H. Kramers. "Tahara", in: *Wörterbuch des Islam*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, p. 264.

Forgiveness of sins is based on ritual observance, genuine contrition, obligatory and voluntary almsgiving and on other works of merit. In addition, God in his inscrutable will forgive whom he will and punish whom he will (2:284). The image of the Last judgment as being weighed on a pair of scales lends credence to the idea of compensating contamination by purity and deeds of merit. Yet the potential for manifold sins of omission and transgressions small and great, combined with the whole gamut of means of purification and compensation, put the outcome of that judgment in grave doubt. Did one's ritual purity suffice, did one's repentance go deep enough, were one's intentions genuine? Were one's loyalty and reverence for the Almighty great enough? Will the believer finally be able to save face or will they be shamed and humiliated when the mask of mere outward purity is torn away?

Some take comfort in the belief that formal fulfilment of their religious duties will ultimately suffice to gain them entry into paradise, by the mercy of Allah and perhaps the Prophet's intercession. Others labour scrupulously to observe every jot and tittle of the law. For both life is a constant rat-race against impurity with no escape from the vicious circle of hope and uncertainty. The mystic Hasan al-Basri characterized this duality somewhat differently: "*Hope and fear are the believer's twin mounts, but fear must outstrip hope, else the heart will decay*"²³. Fear of Allah drives yet another appeal for self disciplined perseverance.

²³ Franz Kardinal König. Der Islam. in: Der Glaube der Menschen und die Religionen der Erde. Hg. v. Franz Kardinal König, Wien: Herder & Co, 1985, p. 264.

The idea of exogenous salvation or any kind of mediator is unacceptable to Islam since man is capable of opting for the good and passing life's test unaided. In complete contrast is Christianity's concept of redemption through the mediation of Jesus Christ. To the Christian path from law to grace Muhammad preferred an absolute monotheism and natural religiosity.

8. Conclusion

Purification rites aimed at restoring the original state of purity accompany the devout Muslim throughout life, since they constitute a standing order for approaching Allah. The emphasis on formal purity, prayer and other ritual observance is a constant reminder of Allah and his laws, but any sense of inner impurity tends to be relegated to the background. One reason for this is the lack of clear teaching about sin in Islam and the Koran's contradictory statements on the subject of forgiveness. It was the particular merit of the Islamic mystics to have brought the concept of inner purity back into people's awareness in opposition to legalistic orthodoxy. Purity and impurity will also be the ultimate criteria on the Day of Judgment when each Muslim receives their just reward. Whether, despite having observed many laws, done good deeds and having many sins forgiven, they will prove sufficiently pure before God, remains an open question. One may therefore conclude that a Muslim's life both in daily obedience and in eternal perspective is characterized by the incessant pursuit of purity.