

Religious Purity in Asia

IKGF Workshop, 13 November 2009

In a brief introduction, Hans Martin Krämer tried to clarify the relevance of religious purity in Asia by referring to three points from the last focus group meeting on purity on 26 October 2009. Firstly, purity as a mechanism of exclusion is present in Asia, albeit perhaps not between different religious groups but only towards social outcasts. Secondly, there are probably few exchange dynamics between Asia and Europe regarding purity; yet there is quite a bit of transfer within Asia, which makes purity interesting for the contact dimension. Thirdly, in answering the question “why purity?” it seems obvious that the crucial difference to other metaphors or modes of inclusion/exclusion is the tension between the material/physical and the non-material dimension specific to purity.

In the only contribution on South Asia, Sven Wortmann spoke on “‘Water vs. Ethics’: Discourses on Purity in Ancient India”. He introduced two texts from the last centuries BCE, one from the Jain tradition, the *Uttarādhyanasūtra*, and one from the Buddhist tradition, the *Therīgāthā*. Both texts openly deal with issues of purity: The Buddhist and Jain protagonists refute the brahminical practice and doctrine of bodily/ritual purification and propagate moral behavior allegorically as better “purification,” but only, as Wortmann argued, because it was a concern for their dialogue partner, in both cases Brahmins (although, as Patrick Olivelle has argued, purity/impurity is not the dominant paradigm in Vedic Brahmanism, but rather order/disorder). Nonetheless, both traditions also showed signs of accommodation to Brahmanical rites of passage in their later development by incorporating a sensibility for purity into their ritual systems. The discussion centered around the reasons why and the mechanisms by which a religious tradition delineates itself from others. The development model presupposing the necessity for demarcation against others during the process of formation of a tradition and later ability to integrate once a tradition is established was called into question; rather it seems that religious traditions are constantly involved in processes of inter- and intrareligious delineations.

In his contribution “Some Remarks on the Semantic Field of Purity in Literary Chinese”, Andreas Müller-Lee set out by indicating that the overlapping of “holy” and “purity,” visible already at the level of object language, was a particularity of the Abrahamic purity concept, not necessarily directly transferable to East Asia. He then introduced some of the earliest descriptions of Chinese and Korean purity in Western-language scholarship, starting with J.J.M. de Groot’s 1912 *Religion in China*. The semantic field of purity as constructed by English-language scholars in the early twentieth century (Robert Henry Matthews,

James Hastings) shows a strong inclination towards chastity; the semantic field as reconstructed from the Confucian taxonomical work *Gujin tushu jicheng* (1725) shows purity as appearing mostly in contexts of morality and scholarly behavior". Both of these findings are probably not remarkable if one considers the Puritan background of the former and the Confucian one of the latter. Among other things, it was pointed out in the discussion that in the case of many of the terms identified as belonging to the semantic field of purity it is difficult, if not impossible, to clearly separate a physical from an ethical meaning.

In the second paper on China, Licia DiGiacinto spoke about "Concepts of Purity in Shangqing Daoism". *Qing*, a word translated as "clear" or "pure" in Western scholarship on Daoism, was a keyword in fifth-century Daoist textual traditions. It is dubious, however, how important purity really was for these traditions. *Qing* was frequently used in a conventional meaning and also in technical usage in the context of alchemy (e.g. referring to the purity of liquids). Even where material taboos were concerned, these overlapped with other cultural realms and did not always occur in strictly religious contexts. Within fifth-century Daoism, actual purity is mainly referred to in two cases: one, purity was supposed to be achieved through refinement of one's own cosmic material, e.g. through alchemy or meditation. Two, purity was sought through ceremonies (dimension of ritual purity), especially through taboos in approaching sacred books, which involved ritual purification ceremonies. The discussion threw up the fundamental terminological question if it is not misleading to say that *qing* refers to the goal of achieving purity and whether it might not be more adequate to say that the goal is something like clarity of vision. Another question if the purity/impurity dichotomy is used to draw boundaries as social markers such as differentiating those with immediate access to sacred books from those with only mediated books. The sources offer very little explicit evidence to this effect.

In the third paper on China, "How to Avoid the Blues when Talking About Muddy Waters? The Trouble with Some Purity Metaphors in pre-Song Discourse," Christian Mularzyk problematized a specific metaphor of purity in the *Fuxing shu* by Li Ao (authored around 800). Investigation of this metaphor helps clarify whether this text is Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian, or perhaps something else entirely. The "Fuxing shu" states that "that through which man becomes a sage is his human nature; that through which man confuses his nature is his feelings". The metaphor employed for making this statement more plausible is that of turbid water: When water is turbid because of stirred up sand, its nature is not lost, the water is just mixed with sand; water regains its nature when the sand sinks to the ground. Emotions confuse the human nature just like that, i.e. human nature is not lost when confused by emotions, but they have to be gotten rid of in order to reclaim true human nature. Mularzyk showed examples of the same metaphor or related passages in a number of classical Chinese works predating the *Fuxing shu*. One can identify elements of this meta-

phor in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist antecedents. Instead, however, of understanding different metaphors as coming from distinguishable sources, Mularzyk proposed an emergentist approach: A complex metaphor emerges from conceptually overlapping parts, and these newly combined strands become a new common ground for future usage of the metaphor. This emergentist approach is in itself not restricted to the field of metaphors but is applicable to any concept with a religious background. In the discussion, it was pointed out that looking at metaphors (or style) in the *Fuxing shu* actually yields insights that would be impossible by just looking at semantics of the structure of the argument (which way of inquiry has erroneously led earlier scholars to argue that the *Fuxing shu* could be entirely understood within a Confucian frame of reference).

In the concluding presentation of the day, Stefan Köck introduced “Purity in Action – On various applications of purity in a ritual process of esoteric Buddhism”. Köck presented a fascinating micro-study of a Buddhist ritual of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism, based on a text ascribed to Kūkai, but more likely written in the Middle Ages. This ritual manual for not yet ordained officiants details the preparations to be taken before the actual ritual could be started. In ten of the various steps to be taken in this preparation, purification is of some significance. The prescriptions explicitly refer both to physical purification, to mentally visualized washings (of the Buddha’s body) and to an ethical dimension (cleansing of defilements and impurities of the mind). The text repeatedly refers to the demand already erected by Vasubhandu’s *Abhidharma-kośa* of a “purity of three categories,” i.e. of body, speech, and mind, which is held necessary in order to become a bodhisattva.

Overall, it became clear that issues of purity are pervasive in the object languages of Asian religious traditions and that, in the sense of the three points raised by Krämer in the beginning of the workshop, purity is very much a salient issue in the study of Asian religions. Yet, there was also the strong impression that, as one participant put it, “purity in Asia is often merely rhetoric, not a *prima facie* category”. Several participants deplored the lack of attention to phenomena of contact and exchange. In this regard, one of the most productive results of the workshop might have been the following suggestion for a possible format of a future workshop: One could take a text that was translated all over Asia (most likely a prominent Buddhist text) and analyze both the translations (for finding out about specific terms) and, more importantly, commentaries which shed light on the relative importance of specific concepts in different traditions, geographical areas, and chronological periods. The area experts assembled in the consortium could contribute social contextualization and things such as relative importance of the text in the target culture and thus trace the interpretation of one or more concepts. It is hoped that this suggestion will be taken up in the future, e.g. to trace the relevance of notions of purity on its way from India and Central Asia over China, Korea, and Southeast Asia to Japan.