



## KHK Working Paper Series

# II. Purity

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**ABSTRACT** Our goal for *Entangled Religions* is to inform readers about occasions, themes, modes, conditions, and consequences of contacts between religious groups and the way religious thought and practice developed in and through such contact phenomena, eventually creating both the larger and smaller religious traditions of today and the religious field as a social entity distinct from other fields such as politics, economics, and art. *Entangled Religions* publishes case studies on the issues outlined above. The engagement with explicit analytical concepts is of specific importance, as those concepts shall serve as *tertia comparationis*, which allow comparability of individual case studies. We invite authors to consider engaging their material with analytical concepts, categories and approaches that have been discussed in the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” (2008–2022), or to introduce other concepts and theories to the discussion. The KHK Working Paper Series informs readers about some major aspects of the KHK’s thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

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Categories of dual differentiation between “pure” and “impure” can be found in all aspects of thinking that structure the world in symbolic forms: culture, society, cult, ritual, morality, everyday life, philosophy.<sup>1</sup> [1]

The asymmetric oppositional terms (“clean”/“unclean”) provide a basis for a categorization which, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, must be regarded as a major social construct. One of our basic assumptions at the KHK was that purity concepts are developed not in isolation but rather in diachronic and synchronic processes of contact, influence, reference and interference, i.e. mutual exchange. Hence, we are interested in a comparison of contents, concepts and especially functions of purity discourses. [2]

While “pure” and “impure” are constructed as diametrical opponents that exclude each other, their dimensions are not completely parallel in construction: While the “pure” can be defiled by contact with “impure” matter, the “impure” cannot be made pure simply by contact. While “impure” is a cumulative category (several impurities can be added), “purity” [3]

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1 This working paper was written in 2017 and updated in 2023. For further reading, see, e.g., Frevel and Nihan (2013) and Bley, Jaspert, and Köck (2015).

usually cannot be gradually amplified by addition or accumulation. While “impurity” is a category often construed in relation to time (something is *temporarily* unclean but becomes clean again after a certain period of time), purity is usually not constrained *explicitly* by temporal extensions/limits.

Pure or impure is not only a category of objects or persons but also of places and spaces [4] (e.g. temple precinct, city, land, living place, etc.). The contagious power of impurity has an unavoidable impact on the pure space. Thus, purity and impurity have a liminal function in establishing the borders of “in” and “out,” inner and outer space, almost on a horizontal axis.

Purity rituals change (or better, *communicate* the change of) the status from impure to pure [5] or confirm the pure state of the cultic space, the matter used in cult, or the persons performing the cult. The transitional function of purity rituals is most meaningful in physical, social, and psychological respects.

Some guiding questions for scholars interested in contributing to *Entangled Religions* with a special emphasis on matters related to purity should be helpful: [6]

(1) What role does “purity” play in the **forming of religious traditions**? How are representations of purity described in the specific material with respect to their *liminal* function from a spatial, temporal, social and institutional perspective? [7]

(2) What role does purity play, within the geographical and chronological context, in **rituals, cult(s), social organization, and individual processes of identity formation**? [8]

(3) Is there a differentiating **semantics of concepts of purity and impurity**? Which are the aspects that come to the fore: physical, cultic, moral-ethical, or genealogical purity? Is there a remarkable differentiation between so-called “ritual” and “moral” purity, and if so, how are these domains distinguished one from the other? How do they influence each other mutually? [9]

(4) How is the **difference between “purity” and “holiness”** (or, respectively, “pure” and “holy”) evaluated (differences, congruence, interdependence)? [10]

(5) Are there, in the investigated material (texts, images or archaeological remains), indications of **diachronic developments of purity representations and concepts**? Are such developments the result of religious contacts or influences from outside, or are they exclusively to be understood as an internal development? [11]

One objective of our comparative approach is thus a comparison of purity semantics. Being [12] aware that the comparison of specific religious traditions on the semantic level is seriously restricted by particularities of the culturally coded languages, the aim is not to compare the semantics in particular, either in a diachronic or a synchronic manner. Often the lexical fields of purity/impurity are not comparable, but the underlying concepts which are expressed semantically in a specific and distinct manner are.

Besides the semantic dimension, another aspect of the relevance of purity concepts in comparative studies is the correlation and interconnection between the anthropological, the social and the cultic dimensions. Purity is often used to assign relevant borders both spatially and socially. Social stratifications and differentiations are defined by purity. This is obvious, for example, in the higher demand for purity of priests as compared to lay people, evidenced in ancient Egypt, Greece, Iran or Israel. [13]

The more a religion or society is forced to demarcate itself by establishing and highlighting [14]

borders, the more important the liminal function of purity becomes in social respects. Purity issues apparently arise where those borders are “in the making” or when they are challenged. Understood in this way, one can speak of the “demarcational” function of purity.

In addition to the basic differentiation between cultic and non-cultic purity, the distinction [15] between ritual and moral purity is often stressed as a second basic differentiation. To have a pure heart or conscience (e.g. Ps 51:12; 1 Tim 3:9) or to act with pure hands (e.g. Ps 18:21) seems to speak of a purity that is completely disconnected from the cultic sphere and is attributed instead to the ethical realm.

Even if purity is considered an ethical issue, this should not lead to disregard for the cultic [16] dimension. The separation of the two categories is misleading in several ways: the dimensions of physical and moral purity differ (for example on the level of acts) but are not two separate concepts, either in synchronic or in diachronic respects. They are close to each other and are often intertwined.

## References

- Bley, Matthias, Nikolas Jaspert, and Stefan Köck. 2015. *Discourses of Purity in Transcultural Perspective (300–1600)*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004289758>.
- Frevel, Christian, and Christophe Nihan. 2013. *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004232297>.