



CLEANSING II. IN ISLAMIC PERSIA

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The identification of unclean objects (*najāsāt*) and of the factors or agents that, within certain limits, may cleanse them (*moṭahherāt*) depends more on the interpretation of prophetic tradition and on juristic deduction than it does on clear Koranic injunctions. Nonetheless, there is broad agreement on the topic among the two schools of Sunnite *feqh* that have had a historical presence in Persia—the Hanafite and the Shafi‘ite—and Shi‘ite jurisprudence. The regulations contained in the Shi‘ite books tend, however, to be more detailed, and it is probably true that questions of ritual cleanness and uncleanness play a larger role in the life of the observant Shi‘ite Muslim than in that of his Sunnite counterpart.

The urine and excrement of humans, as well as of animals the flesh of which is inedible and from which blood gushes forth when the skin is pierced, are unclean. In addition, certain circumstances, such as the consumption of unclean substances and the occurrence of bestiality, may make the urine and excrement of animals with edible flesh unclean. Hanafites and Shi‘ites regard all semen, both human and animal, as unclean, together with vaginal secretions occurring during coition; Shafi‘ites regard all semen as clean, with



the exception of that of pigs and dogs (Jazīrī, p. 9). The blood of humans and of animals from which it spurts when the skin is pierced is also unclean. However, the blood of insects, fish, and marine mammals, as well as the blood remaining in the body of an animal properly slaughtered for meat, is clean, as is the blood on the body of a martyr. Shafi'ite *feqh* regards blood intermingled with milk as clean, whereas Shi'ite law condemns it as unclean (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 12). The carcasses of all animals with spurting blood are unclean, regardless of whether they have died a natural death or been killed in a way other than that specified by the Šarī'a. Similarly, limbs and flesh separated from any living body, human or animal, are unclean, together with any secretions they may emit. Exempt from this are fish and marine mammals found dead in the water, together with their separated parts. Dogs and pigs are unclean, whether alive or dead, together with anything that may become separated from them, like whiskers, hair, and fluff. Wine and any other beverage causing intoxication are unclean, although industrial alcohol used for painting and lacquering is clean (at least according to certain Shi'ite rulings; Ḳomeynī, 1390/1970, I, p. 118). Cannabis and other solid narcotics are also clean, even if water is added to them (Ḳomeynī, 1390/1970, I, p. 13).

Shi'ite *feqh* differs sharply from that of both the Hanafites and the Shafi'ites (but is in accord with that of the Malikites) in regarding all unbelievers as unclean. It is said that many Shi'ite '*olamā*' restrict this ruling to polytheists (*mošrekīn*), considering the People of the Book to be clean (Bāzargān, p. 49). However, according to Ayatollah Khomeini (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 13), all those are unclean who either deny God openly, assign Him a partner, or reject the messengerhood (*resālat*) of the Prophet Moḥammad, as well as those who, while being Muslim in name, reject any of the manifest duties of religion, such as prayer and fasting. The entire physical person of the unbeliever is unclean, including his nails and hair. This ruling appears ultimately to derive from an interpretation of Qur'ān 9:28 ("O you who believe! Truly the polytheists are unclean, so let them not after this year of theirs approach the sacred mosque"), for the contemporary Shi'ite exegete Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī perceives behind it "a ruling to shun contact with them, with moisture or without" (IX, p. 238). This view of unbelievers as unclean receives some support from a tradition of Ebn 'Abbās to the effect that "the persons (*a'yān*) of unbelievers are unclean, like dogs and pigs" (quoted in Alūsī, X, p. 76). Nonetheless, the Koranic verse in question was interpreted narrowly by Abū Ḥanīfa as enjoining only the exclusion of unbelievers from performance of the *ḥajj* and the '*omra* (lesser pilgrimage) and not as barring them from the sacred mosque



(*al-masjed al-ḥarām*) at all times. Shafi'ites took the verse to mean that unbelievers must be barred at all times from the sacred mosque in Mecca but asserted that they might enter all other mosques (Alūsī, X, p. 77). In Shi'ite Persia unbelievers were excluded from all mosques until modern times; now the prohibition is maintained only for shrines of the twelve imams and their descendants. Also regarded as unclean in Shi'ite *feqh* are Muslims who insult or show hostility to any of the imams (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 13).

Clean objects become unclean through contact with any of the items listed above, especially when the contact involves the transfer of moisture. Shi'ite *feqh* is particularly emphatic in regarding moisture as the conveyor of uncleanness, regardless of whether the moisture adheres to the clean or the unclean object before the two come into contact (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 14).

Nonetheless water is the primary agent of cleansing. In order to cleanse, water must be unadulterated (*moṭlaq*); it must have originated as rain or spring water; its color, taste, and smell must not have undergone any change; and it must not have been used previously for any purpose. Detailed regulations spell out the different cleansing properties of running water, water stored in or drawn from a cistern, and water poured into a bowl or other vessel. Regulations also differ depending on the nature of the pollution and the location from which it is to be removed. Thus a dish that has been licked by a dog must be rubbed with clean soil before being washed, and the same applies to a dish from which a pig has eaten, according to Shafi'ite (but not Shi'ite) *feqh*. Polluted garments or carpets should be washed three times, and all the water should be wrung out between washings (Jazīrī, p. 21).

The second principal cleansing agent is dry and clean soil, used principally for cleansing the soles of shoes and of feet that have come into contact with unclean substances. Shi'ite *feqh* recommends that, after removing all obvious traces of pollution from the sole of the shoe or the foot, one walk not less than fifteen paces on dry and clean soil. Asphalt and concrete have no cleansing properties (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 20).

Exposure to the heat of the sun is held to cleanse polluted ground, the exterior structure of buildings, and plants and trees that have suffered pollution—in short, all immovable objects. All obvious traces of the unclean substance should first be removed, and then the surface or object to be cleansed should be moistened. Shi'ite *feqh* specifies that the heat of the sun alone should accomplish the cleansing, not aided by a wind or anything more than a light



breeze. By contrast, Hanafite *feqh* regards the activity of the wind as a cleansing agent in its own right (Jazīrī, p. 21).

Another mode of cleansing consists of *esteḥāla*, the transmutation of the substance of an unclean thing into a clean thing. The classic example of this process, agreed on by all schools, is the transmutation of wine into vinegar. Similar to it is the example of blood in the navel of the musk deer that turns into musk. If a dog falls into a salt mine and is turned into salt, its carcass counts as clean. If an unclean piece of wood is burned to ashes, the ashes are clean, according to Hanafites and Shi'ites but not according to the Shafi'ites. However, neither grinding unclean wheat into flour nor baking bread from unclean flour counts as an instance of *esteḥāla* (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 21; Jazīrī, pp. 26-27).

A somewhat similar procedure is *enteqāl*, transference. This involves the relocation of an unclean substance in a clean one that absorbs it and thereby cleanses it. An example would be human blood drawn by a gnat or flea that is then commingled with its own blood (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 20).

An unclean object may also be cleansed through the cleansing of its contents, a process known as *taba'iyat*. Thus a vat in which wine is kept is automatically cleansed through the transmutation of the wine into vinegar (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 21).

Particular objects, such as mirrors, swords, and other metalwork, may be cleansed through polishing and burnishing. Hanafite *feqh* regards dry rubbing as effective in the case of semen stains on clothing. The skins of animals (excepting both pigs and dogs, according to Shi'ite and Shafi'ite *feqh*, but only pigs, according to Hanafite *feqh*) can be cleansed by tanning (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 22; Jazīrī, p. 8).

Shi'ite *feqh* takes into account the possibility that an animal the flesh of which is edible may become unclean through its consumption of excrement. It then becomes necessary to cleanse it through purgation (*estebrā'*) for periods that vary in length from forty days for a camel to three days for a domestic hen. Another eventuality is that a certain object owned by or in the possession of a Muslim is known to be unclean. If the owner or possessor of the object departs, leaving the object behind, it may be assumed that he took steps to cleanse it before his departure; it may accordingly be regarded as clean. As for the uncleanness that characterizes the unbeliever according to Shi'ite *feqh*, this



may be removed by his profession of Islam (Ḳomeynī, 1359 Š./1980, p. 21).

Noteworthy among contemporary discussions in Persia of questions of cleanness and uncleanness is Maḥdī Bāzargān's *Moṭahherāt dar Eslām*, which has gone through at least ten editions since its first publication in 1349 Š./1960. It represents an attempt to vindicate the provisions of Shi'ite *feqh* by correlating them with modern scientific concepts of hygiene and contrasting them briefly (sometimes erroneously) with parallel rulings in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Sunnite Islam (see the discussion of *esteḥāla* on p. 145).

It may finally be remarked that, although the determination of cleanness and uncleanness lies firmly within the domain of *feqh*, Sufis have always been at pains to emphasize the inner purity of which ritual cleanliness is intended to be the support (see especially Ġazālī, I, pp. 113-14).

See also [āb](#); [ablution](#); [bīnamāzī](#); [burials](#).

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