

## Lecture 10

# Mary Douglas: Ritual Purity

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## Ritual Purity & Impurity

- Ritual purity includes the range of attitude of religious traditions to hygiene, defilement and pollution. Though common in 'primeval' religions, most religious traditions have a way of distinguishing purity and impurity.
- Mary Douglas points out that purity is related to the sacred and impurity to the profane.
- Impurity is any matter considered out of place – anomalous! Purity laws are about symbolic boundary-maintenance.

(Douglas, 1966, *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge).

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## Impurity & Body Fluids

- According to Mary Douglas' analysis of religious impurity (particularly in the Book of Leviticus) body fluids play a vital role in rendering the person impure.
- General Principle: Body fluid outside one's own body renders the body impure – eg. Saliva, bleeding, pus, sexual fluids, faeces, urine. The contact with these by another person renders that person impure.
- Implications: women during menses; both sexes after sexual intercourse; people with skin disorders with oozing liquid (Leprosy).
- Extended implication: women are kept out of the sanctorum of most religions – including the Catholic Church.

Note: We are only pointing out to how impurity was considered within religion; we are not necessarily agreeing to this status!

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## Impurity & Categories of people

- Women are considered impure during menses and soon after child birth (remember the ceremony of "Churching of Women" in the Catholic Church).
- Besides women, in Hinduism, people of certain castes are considered impure. That is, a Brahmin (of priestly caste) coming in contact with a Shudra (of lower caste) would render the Brahmin impure. A bath will be needed to make oneself ready for eating and worship.

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## Douglas: Three degrees of Purity & Impurity

**Highest degree of purity:** necessary for performing acts of worship and sacrifice. The Brahmin in Hinduism after having come in contact with impurity needs to take bath and perform rituals to be ready to serve in the temple; same in the Book of Leviticus (See also Story of Good Samaritan the attitude of the priest and Levite – Lk 10:30-37)

Middle degree of purity:

Impurity:

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## Impurity & Food habits

- **Kosher:** In the Jewish tradition, this refers to prohibition from eating unclean animals (eg. pigs, shellfish); mixing of meat and milk; animals not slaughtered by letting the blood out. Only animals that both chew their cud and have cloven hooves (camel does not have cloven hoof, and pig does not chew the cud).
- **Halal food:** In the Islamic tradition, this generally refers to not eating pig, blood, and only eating animals slaughtered in the name of 'Allah' by letting the blood out – hence not strangled, etc.
- **Vegetarianism:** Buddhists, Jains and Orthodox Hindus are vegetarians – based on considering animals as unclean, but also in adherence to non-violence to animal life. Even the meat eating Hindus do not consume beef – cow has a sacred status in the Hindu household.

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