



POLICING BODIES 1

PURITY, PURITY CULTURE, MODESTY



Tradition and interpretation

- Who is speaking? And who is silent?
- Who is being addressed? Who is absent/excluded from the audience?
- What is the context (cultural, historical, religious, etc) of the views being put forward?
- What rhetoric is being used? [I.e. how are the audience being persuaded?]
- What/whose interests are being protected/promoted? And whose interests are being challenged/threatened?
- What are the consequences – what religious **and** cultural functions are being served?
- Who wins, and who loses? [or ‘who has the power in this relationship?’]

This week:

- What is 'purity' in religious and cultural terms?
- Gendered purity:
 - *Menstruation*
 - *Purity culture and virginity*
 - *Modesty*
- What are the religious and cultural functions of purity and modesty regulations?
- Hermeneutic of suspicion.

Meanings of purity

- The condition or quality of being pure; freedom from anything that debases, contaminates, pollutes, etc.
- Things in their 'correct' place – impurity is caused by 'matter out of place' (Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966).
- Physical chastity; virginity.
- Ceremonial or ritual purity.
- Freedom from guilt or evil; innocence, spiritual purity.

Adapted from dictionary.com (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/purity>)

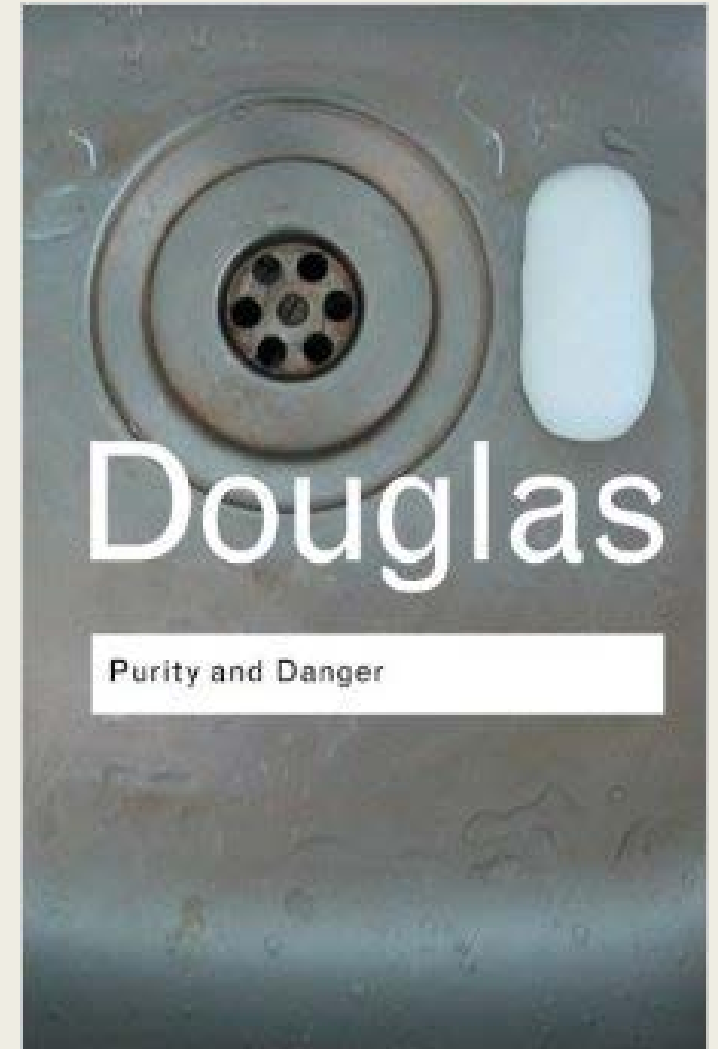
Religious purity regulations

- Bodies and body fluids
 - Foods
 - Diseases
 - Spaces and places
 - Peoples
 - Other objects, including sacred texts
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- Ritual (im)purity
 - Moral (im)purity

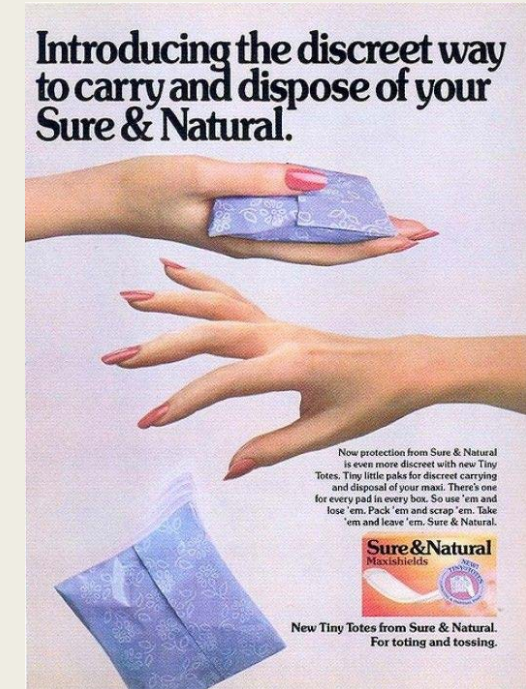


What cultural functions do purity regulations serve in religions?

- A means of cohesion within a group – purity rituals ‘create unity in experience’ (Douglas).
- A way to draw group boundaries and exclude the ‘Other’, particularly among close-dwelling communities.
- A means of social control and validating political/social authority, hierarchies and segregation.
- A symbolic means of “moral” control.



Menstrual taboos in culture



MENSTRUATION AND RELIGION

- Taboo in many religious communities
 - *a (temporary) source of ritual impurity*
 - *contagious, but not necessarily associated with ‘wrongdoing’*
 - *A form of ‘threat’ and danger - taboo*
 - *A ‘supernatural’ event*
 - *Often a source of stigma*
- May involve rituals of segregation and re-purification (laid down in scriptures and traditions).



Menstruation and religion

See reading by Guterman, Mehta, and Gibbs, 'Menstrual Taboos among Major Religions'.

- A 'curse'
- Source of danger and impurity – taboo
- May harm community (especially men)
- Sexual prohibitions
- Social restrictions – segregation (menstruation huts), restriction to touch
- Domestic restrictions – e.g. cooking, family relationships, personal hygiene
- Religious restrictions
- May require re-purification rituals

Reframing menstrual taboos



The Mikvah

See article by Dunnivant and Roberts in your reading list, 'Restriction and Renewal, Pollution and Power, Constraint and Community'.

- Positive understandings of menstruation
 - *Offers women sense of community*
 - *Affirms women's reproductive/creative powers*
 - *Spiritual significance*
 - *An important rite of passage*
 - *Offers women respite from other rules and regulations governing their lives*

Questions to ask of religious discourses about menstruation

- Who is speaking? And who is silent?
- Who is being addressed? Who is absent/excluded from the audience?
- What is the context (cultural, historical, religious, etc) of the views being put forward?
- What/whose interests are being protected/promoted? And whose interests are being challenged/threatened?
- What rhetoric is being used?
- Who has the power in this relationship?

WHAT ARE THE CULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF MENSTRUAL TABOOS IN RELIGIONS?

- Menstrual stigma/taboo extends beyond religious boundaries – it is a socio-cultural construct.
- Policing women's bodies, sexually and socially?
- Asserting patriarchal authority? Or the authority of patriarchal religious traditions/hierarchies?
- Rendering women's reproductive health a 'public' or communal concern – fears over paternity?
- Barring entry of women to full religious life and leadership?

Cultural relativism? Or is there a need to address cultural and religious menstrual stigma?

