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Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature

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Part I

Purity in its Contexts
This book examines the meanings of purification practices and purity concepts in early Christian culture, as they were articulated and formed by Christian authors of the first three centuries, from Paul to Origen. Concepts and practices of purity and defilement shaped the understanding of human nature, sin, history, and ritual in early Christian communities. Purity and defilement were instrumental for articulating difference, hierarchy, and change in these communities. These concepts were central for answering many of the key questions for which Christians of the first centuries sought answers: What is the difference between Christians and non-Christians? How can a pagan or a Jew become a Christian? What happens when a person sins, and how can sin be allayed? In parallel, the major Christian practices embodying difference and change, baptism, abstinence from food or sexual activity, were all understood, felt, and shaped as instances of purification.

The Christian purity practices and concepts which emerged in this period had much in common with those of Greco-Roman religions and Judaism, but were nevertheless innovative on many fronts. Purity served all ancient religions to negotiate the difference between the divine and human realm, to construct borders between social groups, and to signify and embody changes people underwent in their lives. But while Christians, too, used purity and defilement to address these issues, there was a real shift in what purity meant, which can be seen both in practice and in discourse. This interplay between continuity and change in Christian purity practices and discourse is the subject of this book.

SCHOLARLY NEGLECT

Despite the importance of purity and defilement for early Christian thought and practice, there is little scholarship to date which explores the development of these concepts. While purity and defilement in the Gospels and Paul were thoroughly investigated in the past decades, and there are a significant number
of studies which discuss various purity aspects in the first three Christian centuries,1 there is no scholarly work which investigates Christian purity and defilement in the second and third centuries across several domains. In works which are dedicated to baptism or to sexual abstinence, two fields in which purity language is prominent and which are relatively well-studied, purity is rarely singled out for study. Even in scholarly literature on the body in early Christianity, a field greatly developed in the past decades, purity and defilement do not receive sustained discussion, especially in the ante-Nicene period.2 Thus, despite its centrality, purity is treated as an ad hoc concept accompanying other concepts such as *askesis*, abstinence, and sin, and not understood in its own right. Furthermore, little connection is made between purity as understood in different domains of Christian writing: in anti-Jewish polemics on the dietary laws, in discussions of Christian rituals, and in exhortations and arguments about sexuality. The separation of domains is exacerbated by the common translation of ἁγνεία when appearing in a sexual context as “chastity,” rather than “purity” or “holiness”; this translation, while not erroneous, conceals the broader connotations of the term. It appears that purity and defilement are rarely seen as relevant concepts for Christianity beyond the first century and before the Middle Ages, i.e., in late antiquity.3

How did this situation come about? To a great extent, it is the legacy of the Church Fathers themselves. The formation of Christian belief and ritual in the first centuries took place in fierce polemic against other religions, their beliefs and their rituals, and purity is no exception. Explicit discussions of purity and defilement in the church fathers typically occur in a polemical context, and therefore their main motivation was to demonstrate the superiority of their own purity conceptions relative to other religious groups. Purity rituals of others were singled out as prime examples for irrelevant and insignificant rituals, to which true worship and ritual should be opposed. Christian purity concepts were cast as spiritual and moral, concerning only purification from sin; those of other religions as corporeal and external, concerning only purification from bodily defilement. An explicit discussion of the bodily aspects of Christian purity ritual would have been detrimental to these polemical interests.

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2 The fourth century, with its wealth of ascetic phenomena and associated texts, is in a somewhat better situation: see Brakke (1995); Shaw (1998); Clark, E. (1999); Clark, G. (2011).

3 This attitude is exemplified also in recent scholarship. For example, in a volume of essays on purity in the ancient world (Frevel and Nihan [2013a]), the latest essays concern Rome and Second Temple Judaism; in a sequel volume in the same series, titled “Purity in Transcultural Perspective” (Bley et al. [2015]), the earliest essays are on the early medieval period.
Introducing Purity Discourses

Such polemical formulations, which understood purity rituals to be simply irrelevant for Christians, were largely followed in the past by scholars of Christianity. Recent work has shown that the Gospels and Paul's letters, rather than simply rejecting ritual impurity, reflect its complex negotiation, drawing upon earlier traditions of relating to moral and ritual impurity. However, this revisionist perspective rarely goes beyond the first century, and so second- and third-century texts are still seen on the background of a simplistic notion of supersessionism, understanding early Christians to be devoid of ideas and practices of ritual purity. This is unjustified: second- and third-century polemics on purity show that purity was open for negotiation at a later period as well. Early Christian writers had to persuade their readers that their purification practices were more efficacious and significant than those of others. The polemics thus served as an impetus for the articulation of theories of purity and purification, which explained how a person could only be truly purified through Christian practice and belief. These theories, and the tensions which they respond to, are one of the recurrent themes of this book.

The polemical discussions are commonly taken to be the early Christian message on purity, to the detriment of the implicit Christian discourse on the subject, which was no less significant. Terms and images of purity and defilement are ubiquitous in early Christian writings, but they are usually a backdrop to the issues being developed, the idiom of the discussion and not its object. Thus, precisely because purity pervaded the thought world of Christian writers, it was generally taken for a given. This implicit purity discourse constitutes a better vantage point for discerning the writers' habitus, their non-reflective practices embodying their principles, than their explicit, polemical purity discourse.

PURITY PRACTICE AND PURITY DISCOURSE

Rules of purity and defilement are found in all cultures, though there is immense variety in the objects or actions seen as defiling, as well as the means of purification. The most influential general theory concerning rules of purity and

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4 Hübner (1992) is an extreme example: “Cleanness is no longer understood as cultic/ritual in the NT, rather as ethical/soteriological, and soteriological/sacramental. Therefore, over against the OT and ancient thought… a radically new understanding of reality for the relation of God to humanity is gained. There emerges an opposing force in the NT that… in the Patristic period has a disastrous effect and renews reactionary thinking in the categories of uncleanness and cleanness once overcome by Jesus.”

5 For purity as an idiom, see Valeri (2000), 112–13.

6 For the primacy of habitus compared to conscious articulated discourse, see Bourdieu (1990), 52–97.
Part I Purity in its Contexts

defilement is Mary Douglas’ structural-symbolic theory, first put forward in her book *Purity and Danger.* For Douglas, defilement is found in the ambiguous areas in and near the margins of society’s structures, and, in parallel, in and near the margins of structural forms, primarily the human body. In her theory, purity rules are explained through their social function, which is to maintain the structures of society, thought, and body by marking their margins and ambiguities. In a further publication, *Natural Symbols*, Douglas attempted to align different types of social groups and societies with different types of rituals practiced in these societies. For example, a highly hierarchical society with strong internal social control will practice rigorous purity rituals symbolizing the internal social hierarchy; moral purity is expressed by ritual purity. In contrast, a small, competitive group attempting to differentiate itself from society at large will practice different types of ritual, which construct the external boundaries of the body but pay less attention to the internal hierarchy; witchcraft is extensively feared, a reflection of the fear of the group from society at large.

For the purposes of my study, Douglas’ theory is helpful only to a limited extent. Her insights on the symbolic links between individual and collective body, namely that the body of the person parallels the social body, and that concerns about defining the borders of the former reflect and/or embody concerns about the borders and identity of the latter, must be examined by any study dealing with historical aspects of the human body. Furthermore, the more precise correlations identified in *Natural Symbols* are informative as possible backgrounds for various types of purity rituals and beliefs. However, Douglas’ functionalist theory has been criticized for its lack of appreciation of historical diversity and change and the primacy it gives to the social dimension over individual, cognitive, and ideational dimensions. The correlation of purity theories to social realities requires a “thick description” of the social situation in the maelstrom of early Christian movements and groups, sadly unavailable to the modern historian. Furthermore, the details of her theory simply do not hold up in the historical situation of early Christianity. In a masterful article on the attitudes towards nocturnal emissions in the third- to fifth-century church, David Brakke had similar findings:

While Douglas’ formulation above provides the right questions for our study, a direct correlation between greater need to define social boundaries and greater

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7 Douglas (2002 [1966]). In later work published by Douglas in the 1990s, she has changed her perspective on several crucial questions; however, her earlier work is much more influential and is seen as her major contribution to the discussion.
10 The first example is of what Douglas calls high grid and high group, the second of low grid and high group. My description is of course highly condensed and does not do justice to the complexity of the theory. For different versions of Douglas’ theory and discussion, see Spickard (1989).
11 See Jenson (1992), 76–8; Beard (1995); Valeri (2000), 70–83; Bradley (2012); Frevel and Nihan (2013b), 6–9. For criticism of functionalism as a tool for analysis of ancient ritual and a plea for attention to the interpretations given by ancient authors, see Johnston (2008), 469–72.
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anxiety about the integrity of the individual body does not obtain. Particularly when the group against which a community wishes to define itself is perceived to have such strong purity concerns, the lack of such concerns can become a mode of tight self-definition.12

Therefore, rather than correlate early Christian evidence to a general social theory, I seek to place the transformations occurring in purity conceptions and the conflicts about them in historical context and to understand their relationship to the textual and practical traditions of purity from which they have sprung. The turn from the general to the particular is in accordance with the “recent scholarly trend […] to focus on the internal mechanisms of purity systems within specific communities, and the impact of those systems on a community’s activities, beliefs and traditions;”13 or, in the words of a recent study of pollution and Greek tragedy, to “[abandon] the idea of definition of essence (‘what it is’) in favour of a focus on description, ‘how it is’.”14

An alternative methodological approach developed over the past decades is of defilement as arising not from an artificial or culture-driven structure, but rather from a biological reaction of disgust towards certain actions and substances, even if mediated by culture. This direction offers a compelling framework for explaining how morality is embodied and emotionally created and expressed through practices of purity and defilement.15 According to many contemporary studies, the disgust response is a basic and universal emotion with unique bodily and neurological characteristics, manifested, for example, in a specific facial expression. It is claimed that the disgust response is a mechanism which evolved to protect humans from infections by pathogens. As such, the core disgust elicitors are excrement and corpses, with disgust awakened especially by the proximity of such substances to the skin or orifices, and ameliorated by washing them off. So far, the parallel between disgust and pollution beliefs and practices is clear. However, beyond this core there is a wide and varied field of substances and actions which may elicit disgust: various foods, animals, body products, sexual acts, poor hygiene, as well as grossly immoral actions and strange or unusual activities in general. All of these vary widely between cultures and even individuals, as do the cultural mechanisms and rituals created to manage disgust. Even in the case of core disgust elicitors, different cultures may express and manage disgust very differently. Among these variations, disgust may or may not be expressed through rituals; when rituals exist, these vary immensely in their centrality and intensity. In other words,


13 Bradley (2012), 17.


disgust research provides information on what may be the target of purity rules and why, but not so much on why a particular selection of these rules is found in any particular culture.

Since the disgust perspective leaves so much to cultural variation and its details do not necessarily correlate with purity rules, it has little explanatory power in a study of a discourse deeply embedded in an existing cultural tradition. Nevertheless, it is useful for three reasons. First, it provides a general outline of which areas are susceptible to purity rituals and discourses in most cultures, confirming that food, death, sexual relations and emissions, as well as outsiders and immoral behavior are areas which should be examined. Second, it serves as a reminder that not all is tradition: while the Christian authors are working within and reacting to an existing discourse on purity and defilement, there is also a basic biological foundation of disgust from certain substances, to which it was difficult to be totally oblivious.

Third, an investigation of the historical roots of Western purity discourse may aid the contemporary study of disgust. Philosophers and psychologists are debating vigorously to what extent immoral behavior is in fact a disgust elicitor, and what are the implications of this. Religious ideas are central in contemporary definitions of disgust. For example, one central article defines disgust as “the guardian of the temple of the body,” and contrasts disgust, which guards against “threats to the soul,” to fear, which guards against “physical threats to the body.” Another argues that disgust is felt specifically towards “violations of divinity.” These ideas are to a great extent part of a specific (Western/Christian) cultural tradition, and thus a historical critique of their formulation in the pivotal period of early Christianity can serve to explain their presence in Western culture, and to indicate possible paths for intercultural comparison on these questions.

This study focuses on the purity discourse created in Christian communities rather than on the purity practices of these communities. All that is known of purity in early Christianity is mediated through texts; and it is principally the texts (and the beliefs of authors as expressed in texts), rather than the practices themselves, which I intend to investigate. While some facts on the practices themselves can be ascertained through the texts—e.g., baptism was conducted in the first centuries and was preceded by certain prayers and rituals—their character as purity practices was a result of the interpretation of the people who practiced them, to which, again, we have access only through the textual lens of Christian writers. Inevitably, a historian can only analyze text or artifact, and only at second instance the practice itself. This is especially relevant for the history of Christian ritual, which has a strong polemical aspect and in which writers

16 Haidt et al. (1997). 17 Rozin et al. (1999). 18 For the importance of collaboration between cognitive research and historians on purity and pollution, see Feder (2016).
were continuously in dialogue with other purity traditions. This focus on purity discourse will facilitate the understanding of what early Christians themselves understood purity and defilement to be, rather than how their practices can be understood through purity concepts imposed from the outside.

Considering this focus, it is essential to chart out the rather uneven field of purity discourse, at least as a starting point. The connotations of purity terms are wide, frequently general and imprecise, and not necessarily religious; therefore, many instances of their usage are not at the heart of this investigation, though they may form the basis for the very idea of purity. On the most mundane level, καθαρός could be applied to a person or an object when it was physically clean and washed, or physically unmixed or unstained with a foreign substance; μιαρός or ἀκάθαρτος when the opposite was the case. This usage of the terms, which has little to do with either religious or cultural purity, is not directly under discussion here, though it is relevant as the main image behind purity discourse. A second usage of impurity language is that used to convey emotions of disgust and contamination. As discussed above, these emotions need not be ritualized or have religious motivation or significance, and this type of usage is therefore not the focus of the discussion. However, when disgust is articulated or validated religiously or is expressed through religious rituals or laws, it comes into the ambit of this book. A third usage of purity and defilement language is to describe the general moral status of people, which may or may not have religious consequences. In these cases, the author’s intention was not to imply that the person is free or not of a specific defilement, but rather to add general rhetorical edge to their praise or condemnation of a person or action. This ad hoc usage borrows the connotations of purity language but without implying a larger worldview connected to it.

To determine which of these usages is meant, it is essential to examine the context. For example, when “pure” appears without further elaboration as one adjective in a list of positive adjectives describing a person, it is reasonable to see it as more general and less significant. On the other hand, when a number of purity terms appear, and especially when the relations between these terms are specified (e.g., a specific defilement is opposed to purity, purification from defilement is called for, impurity is identified as opposed to holiness), this is a more significant text. In these cases, purity or defilement is not an unstructured, general term, but a specific part of a conceptual structure.

A number of terms bear a close relation to purity, and thus merit discussion here. The first is ἁγιός and its derivatives, meaning “holy” or “sacred.” Other terms for holy or sacred are σιωπ, ἱερός and σεμνός. These are less frequent in the New Testament and early Christian writers than ἁγιός. For a discussion of the relationships between these terms, see Wartelle (1989).
term is relatively rare in earlier Greek literature, but is used hundreds of times in the LXX to render the root γάρ as well as other terms relating to the divine and the sancta, and then used copiously by Paul and most early Christian writers. There is an affinity between concepts of holiness and religious purity, as both are attributes of the divine and therefore necessary attributes of people who wish to approach the divine, or of places and objects linked to the divine. However, these terms are not synonymous. In general, while ἅγιος denotes what is positively set apart and consecrated to God, purity is frequently (though not always) a negative concept, referring to a lack of defilement. Seen more dynamically, purification is the removal of defilement, while sanctification or consecration is a raising of status.

Another relevant group of words is that of corruption (φθορά) and incorruption or integrity (ἀφθαρσία). φθείρω can extend to mean “to subject to decay or death,” “to destroy (physically or morally),” and also “to seduce.” As such the meaning of these terms appears to be rather far from defilement, and is not used to connote defilement in Jewish Greek authors. However, second- and third-century Christian writers frequently used words of this group, sometimes together with terms of defilement, to describe their revulsion from sexual sin. Following post-first-century Greek usage as found in Plutarch and other writers, these words function as terms of moral disgust, and their appearance signals the emotional and rhetorical force of such sins. As in the case of terms of defilement proper, this word group is at times used ad hoc or more systematically as opposed to purity and/or holiness (in the case of φθορά) or as opposed to defilement (in the case of ἀφθαρσία). These terms shall be discussed only in the latter case, when φθορά appears to expand the borders of purity discourse.

EXAMINING DICHOTOMIES

The central dichotomy of Christian purity discourse is that of sin versus bodily defilement: this dichotomy is negotiated again and again throughout the corpus. At times, sin is strongly differentiated from bodily defilement, and interest in the latter is relegated to Jews or pagans; elsewhere, sin and bodily defilement appear to be conflated, with sin reified and made corporeal. Frequently, this dichotomy is described by scholars as reflecting an opposition of “moral purity” versus “ritual purity,” with the former relating to sin and the latter to bodily defilement.

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21 See Gehman (1954). ἅγιος very rarely (twice out of hundreds) translates terms of purity (τένει: Lev 10:14; τένει: Jer 4:11) in the LXX.

22 At times words of this group may take on meanings of defilement: see Lampe (1961), φθορά (2); Liu (2013), 122–3 concerning 1 Cor 3:16.

23 For the term in Plutarch, see Vamvouri Ruffy (2012).
defilement with little moral significance. Thus Jonathan Klawans, in his seminal *Sin and Impurity in Ancient Judaism*, traces the development of various relationships—opposition, compartmentalization, merge—between systems of ritual purity and moral purity across the history of ancient Judaism, from the Hebrew Bible to the Rabbis and the New Testament. Clearly, in order to better understand the dynamics of Christian purity discourse, the shifts and continuities of this dichotomy should be traced and analyzed, with special attention given to how the concepts of sin and defilement are shaped in the discourse.

As an external vantage point to Christian purity discourse, I will use a general heuristic consisting of “battle” and “truce,” referring to the relationship between pure and impure as found in different religions and cultures, including early Christianity. These terms were not (usually) used by the authors themselves, and are rather an attempt at a synthesis. While both “battle” and “truce” perceptions of purity are found in most cultures, in some one perception is more dominant than the other; in Judaism and Greco-Roman religions truce perceptions were more dominant, while in early Christianity battle perceptions were dominant.

For truce perceptions, purity and impurity are statuses, rather than forces. Both purity and impurity are conceived as normal, a result and expression of human life and the order of the world. There is no attempt to totally eradicate impurity. Rather, purification consists in the separation of pure from impure and the careful management of the borders between things or people of different statuses, which are continuously breached and sealed again. An admixture is therefore seen as impure, as purity consists in separation. Purity is essentially a second-order mechanism: it safeguards and defines the borders of social groups, spaces, and times, thus creating and constructing these entities and the order of the religious and social cosmos. This function is usually achieved through ritual. Purity and defilement have a moral dimension in the support they give to the primary structures of society.

In battle perceptions, purity and impurity are seen as two opposing, active forces: the former is good, the latter evil. Purity and impurity are aligned with the general struggle between good and evil. Therefore, purity and impurity frequently merge with other common dichotomies: between holiness and unholiness, saint and demon, righteousness and sin, flesh and spirit, out-group and in-group. Since both purity and impurity are active forces, they may vanquish each other: a strong force of purity/holiness can drive out weak impurity and vice versa. The struggle between purity and impurity may be internalized—a person may contain both elements, and attempt to achieve purification by strengthening the pure aspects and weakening the impure. As primary mechanisms, purity and impurity have a moral aspect, but ritual is an important way of conducting and expressing the struggle between pure and impure.

24 For alternative terminologies of Jewish purity, see chapter 2, n. 111.
This study discusses Christian texts written in Greek and Syriac up to the time of Origen—the middle of the third century—including those extant only in Latin or Syriac translation. I also discuss briefly some of the Coptic texts found in Nag Hammadi.25 Geographically, I focus on the Eastern Roman Empire and Mesopotamia, i.e., the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking areas: specifically, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor. The main fatalities of this linguistic and geographic concentration are the Latin North Africans Tertullian, Cyprian, and Novatian, as well as the (originally Greek) *Apostolic Tradition*, which may have been written in Rome.26 All of these relate to issues of purity and defilement (especially concerning sex and baptism), but will require a separate study. Other texts not discussed are the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, *Joseph and Asenath* and other apocryphal texts based on characters from the Old Testament. While some of these texts include references to purity and defilement, they are very difficult to date and to assign to a Jewish, Christian, or Jewish-Christian context, with datings ranging from the first centuries BCE to the fourth century CE. These texts, too, await further study from the purity perspective.27 Yet another text not discussed comprehensively in this book for reasons of uncertain dating is *P. Oxy 840*, which deals with baptism and purity in a polemical context.28

I chose to concentrate on four subjects—food, death, baptism, and sex. These subjects appear to me to include the most significant purity discourse in early Christian texts, both explicit and implicit. Furthermore, these subjects provide quite different vantage points on Christian purity discourse, allowing for comparison and analysis. Since these were the main areas of purity and defilement discourse also in the cultures from which Christianity grew, focusing on these subjects facilitates discussions of continuity versus innovation and counter-definition. Necessarily, this concentration means that some other issues receive

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25 Aspects of purity and defilement in fourth-century Christianity have been more extensively studied than those of earlier periods, and will not be discussed here; see references above, n. 2.

26 Though many scholars believe it is an aggregation of sources from different areas and periods between the second and fourth centuries; see Bradshaw et al. (2002), 1–19. *Apostolic Tradition* 15–21 has much material on the baptismal process as purification: see Kelly (1985), 81–93; Bradshaw et al. (2002), 82–135; Ekenberg (2010). And see also *Apostolic Tradition* 41.11 on sex and prayer. For Tertullian on purity and defilement, see especially *Idol.* 16–18; *Spect.* 8, 17; *Cor.* 12 (on idolatry); *Marc.* 2.18, 4.8–9 (on Jewish law); *Ieun.* 1–5, 14–15 (on food); *Bapt.* 4–5, 15, 18–20 (on baptism); *Ux.* 2.2; *Virg.* 7; *Pud.* 13–19 (on sex) with Radler (2009). On moral and ritual transformations in Tertullian in general, see Stroumsa (1999), 158–67. For Cyprian, see *Ep.* 64 (58).5; 70 (69); 74 (73).5; *Laps.* 10, 15–17, 22–7 (on baptism, rebaptism, and idolatry) with Burns (1993); *Eleem.* 2–3 (on inner and outer purification); *Hab. virg.* 2, 17–19 (on sex) with Hunter (2007), 120–2.


Introducing Purity Discourses

less attention: idolatry, discussed briefly in the context of food offered to idols; illness and healing in general and leprosy in particular; and purification from sin in contexts other than the Christian community: the purification/atone-
ment afforded by Jesus in his death and purification in the eschaton. Other areas are discussed throughout the book as cutting across the four subjects, but do not receive separate chapters: for example, the defilement of “the other” (pagans, heretics, or Jews) and demonology.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

This introduction is followed by a chapter on purity and defilement in the Greco-Roman world and in Judaism, together comprising Part I. Part II, com-
posed of chapters 3 and 4, discusses two areas in which Christian purity dis-
course focused on its difference from Judaism (and to a lesser extent, from paganism): dietary observances and death defilement. Part III, composed of chapters 5 to 7, discusses three areas in which the focus of first- and second-century Christian purity discourse was on creating and explaining new rituals and social practices: baptism, eucharist and the management of sin, especially sexual, in the community. Part IV, composed of chapters 8 and 9, turns to the third century, and to two groups of texts in which purity discourse is especially significant: texts from Jewish-Christian communities and the writings of Origen. In both of these, purity discourse is multi-layered, with both battle and truce type discourses playing their part.

In chapter 2, I describe in brief how purity and defilement were practiced and discussed in the diverse cults practiced throughout the Hellenistic and Roman Empires and in the cult practiced by Jews in the Hellenistic, Roman, and Parthian empires. Several types of purity and defilement were in operation in ancient religions. The first type, corresponding to a “truce” impurity perception, was temporary and mundane, a defilement occurring when there was an obstruc-
tion to the normal order or when categories were mixed up. Typical examples are blood transgressing the boundaries of the body, or the dead intruding upon the living; defiled persons required relatively simple purifications in order to enter temples. A second type of defilement, corresponding to a “battle” impurity perception, followed exceptional actions, typically deliberate, such as murder or adultery. Here purification required both punishment by the community and ritual actions, such as sacrifice. A third type, an extension and interioriza-
tion of “battle” impurity, became more and more significant in the first centur-
ies CE. This was the defilement of the individual by his or her evil actions and

dispositions, conceptualized at times as a “defilement of the soul,” and its purification through asceticism, philosophy, or repentance. This purification could be a life-long pursuit of an ideal of purity that could rarely be reached.

Though purity and defilement featured in both Greco-Roman and Jewish religions, it received an unusually central role in Judaism. Purity from temporary defilements was highly valued among significant portions of the Jewish population in the first centuries BCE and CE, and Jewish writers made much use of purity terms to describe moral virtues and sins. While purity in late Second Temple Judaism has received scholarly attention in the past decades, second- and third-century Judaism, in which purity rituals had to be interpreted anew for a religion without a sacred center, have been much less investigated in this regard. For the purposes of this study, the former is important for understanding the ground from which Christian conceptions grew or reacted against, while the latter provides a comparison for contemporary Christianity.

The following two chapters, on dietary laws and death defilement, respectively, focus on areas in which Christian discourse of the first two centuries associated bodily purity with Judaism and nominally rejected it. In these areas, the battle perception of purity held by the emerging Christian communities was fundamentally at odds with the truce perception of Jewish and Greco-Roman religions, leading to a total lack of sympathy towards the purity rules of these religions.

Chapter 3 discusses the purity and defilement of food. Starting from the Gospels and the letters of Paul, food is the *locus classicus* for debates on the correct attitude towards purity laws. Issues of food purity served as a focus for the construction of Christian identity in the first and second centuries, and it is from here that purity issues received their polemic character. While the first-century sources reject only some secondary Jewish food purity laws, by the end of the century the Levitical dietary laws themselves were under dispute, creating the basis for all subsequent opinion. Most second-century Christian writers agreed that food, in principle, cannot be impure, and that the application of purity status to food characterizes Jews or heretics. Evidence from scripture or communal custom which indicated the contrary required explanation, and these explanations indicate how writers translated the notion of impurity into concepts coherent with their worldview.

The discussion in this chapter is constructed around two types of such problematic evidence. The first was Christian observance of food abstinence, especially from food offered to idols, and their description using terms of purity and defilement by Paul. The second was the dietary laws of Leviticus, in which scripture speaks of certain foods as impure. Writers such as the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria put forth a variety of readings—allegorical, historical, and ascetic—to contend with the implications of the dietary laws for a theory of purity. These readings represent an attempt to reconstruct the notion of defilement on the foundation of human
free will. Although this may appear to be a radical move undermining the basis for a “real” distinction between various foods, I argue that it in fact retains a notion of impurity while using a new moral language which accords with the theological and anthropological outlook of early Christians.

Chapter 4 turns to another area in which the idea of purity was nominally rejected: purification from death defilement, commonly practiced throughout the ancient world. Here too, Christian writers spoke of death defilement in a polemic context, characterizing purification from death defilement as a Jewish preoccupation, which Christians should not practice. It is quite unclear, however, to what extent Christian death impurity practice was in fact different from that of pagans or Jews. A close reading of the texts in their historical contexts indicates that Christian purity discourse in this area is better understood as constructing Christian identity, rather than reflecting contemporary practice. And yet, as compared to the energy expended on contending with issues of food purity, death defilement received relatively few mentions in Christian writers of the first three centuries. This indicates that death defilement was not a suitable object for anti-Jewish polemic for many Christian writers. The reason for this, I argue, lies in the deep transformations which Christianity brought about in perceptions of the dead human body and in perceptions of sacred space. Due to these transformations, death defilement became a totally unviable option for Christian ritual, and polemic was not required.

The following three chapters focus on baptism and sin, areas in which the focus of Christian discourse was not on the rejection of Jewish purity practices but rather on the adoption or creation of new notions of bodily purity and defilement.

Chapter 5 discusses baptism, a ritualization of the Christian battle-perception of purity, and a marking of the community’s external boundaries. Most authors who wrote about baptism in the first and second centuries characterized it as an act of purification, an understanding which is supported by the imagery of the ritual itself and by the Jewish and pagan parallels. This understanding made baptism dangerously similar to Jewish ritual, and the first section of the chapter therefore focuses on the efforts of Christian authors to differentiate between Christian baptism and Jewish rituals.

In this chapter I investigate what exactly baptism was thought to purify. Some authors speak of a purification from past sins, others from Sin as a cosmological or ontological entity; some of materiality itself, yet others of “the flesh,” the “fire of lust,” or even impure spirits. This identification of baptism—a physical act of washing—with purification from what would seem to be non- or semi-physical entities makes it a major site for addressing the relationship between external and internal purity, the role of conscious intention as opposed to ritual action, and the place of spiritual entities. Many Christian authors, such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, carefully skirt this danger zone by emphasizing the conscious moral metanoia undertaken by the baptizand and
the spiritual enlightenment accompanying the ritual, all the while taking care
to point out that other groups—pagans, Jews, or various “heretics”—believe
they can be purified by the physical act alone. Other writers, however, do
attempt to work out the spiritual workings of a physical ritual, indicating that it
is a reflection of the duality of the human person and of the cosmos as a whole.
Such theorizing can be found already in Valentinian texts such as the Excerpta
ex Theodoto, and is developed in Origen’s symbolic ritual theory or in the
Didascalia Apostolorum’s demonological theory.

In chapter 6 I turn to the internal ordering of the community through purity
discourse concerning sin. I discuss the regulation of sin inside the borders of
the pure community, focusing on the eucharist and on the conceptualization
of repentance as purification. Though in the first two centuries the eucharist
already became the sacred ritual representing the community, and was there-
fore guarded by purity restrictions, there was as yet no ritual system through
which sinners could purify themselves and thus approach the eucharist.

Chapter 7 focuses on sexual purity discourse. I show that sexual sin became
the main target for purity discourse in early Christian texts, and try to explain why.
Christian imagery of sexual defilement drew from a number of traditions—
Greco-Roman sexual ethics, imagery of sexual sin from the Hebrew Bible and
Second Temple texts, and both Jewish and pagan purity laws, all seen through
the lens of Paul’s imagery of sexuality and sexual sin. These traditions them-
selves reflected battle perceptions of purity, and therefore Christianity adapted,
rather than rejected them.

Two broad currents characterized Christian sexual ethics in the second
century: one upheld marriage and the family as the basis for a holy Christian
society and church, while the second rejected all sexuality, including in mar-
riage. Writers of both currents made heavy use of defilement imagery. For the
first, sexual sin was a dangerous defilement, contaminating the Christian com-
munity and severing it from God; some writers also recognized intercourse or
menstruation as a temporary defilement, preventing religious activities (a rem-
nant, or perhaps resurgence, of a truce-perception of purity). For the second,
more radical current, sexuality itself was the defilement, and a Christian who
wished to be a “temple of God” must not succumb to it; virginity or continence
alone were pure. I focus on the way purity discourse served the rhetorical inter-
ests of each current. For the first, purity language was a way of emphasizing the
difference between Christians and pagans, but also a way of constructing an
alternative sexual purity model to that of the radical anti-marriage sects. For
the second, purity language worked to blur the borders between sexual sin and
sexuality in general; typically, pure virginity was opposed to defiled adultery,
excluding a middle option of pure marriage.

Part IV moves from the second to the third century, and, I argue, from a
period in which battle imagery was almost totally dominant in Christian purity
discourse to a period in which it was combined with truce imagery, reflecting
the new ritual structures being constructed and the stronger integration of the Hebrew Bible into Christian culture.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to texts providing information on Jewish-Christian communities, especially the chapter 26 of the Didascalia Apostolorum, the Ps.-Clementines, and sources on the Elchasites. These sources show that baptism had a purificatory role quite similar to that which it received in other communities with a focus on purification from sexual sin. Other purificatory washings were practiced as well, mostly as purification from genital emissions or from sexual relations. Demons were frequently invoked to explain the workings of impurity. As all of these ideas and practices existed also in other Christian communities, none of them individually are unique to Jewish-Christians. Nevertheless, the combination of all of them together created a purity discourse with a specific flavor, which was not simply of retaining Jewish custom but of a different conceptualization of what purity and defilement in fact mean.

In Chapter 9 I turn to Origen, probably the most important Christian writer of the third century. I argue that Origen’s purity discourse was innovative on many fronts, as can be seen in his writings on sexuality, baptism, and on dietary issues. Defilement imagery concerning sexuality is especially prominent. Many of the ideas found in the earlier traditions and in the two second-century currents are synthetized here into a new (at times inconsistent) theory of sexual defilement. Although Origen did not prohibit marriage, he saw sexuality as defiled, the quintessential expression of human corporeality, closely connected with sin though not synonymous with it. I argue that Origen was the first Christian thinker who integrated the notion of temporary sexual defilement found in the Hebrew Bible with the second-century Christian notion of essential sexual defilement, creating a nuanced conception of defilement which was to have great influence in the future.

As in sexual issues, in baptism too Origen supplies a relatively systematic usage of purity discourse; baptism and sex are linked through his understanding of infant baptism as purification from an inherent defilement linked to the sexual origin of the human body. Some Jewish-Christian sources also saw a degree of overlap between baptismal purification and purification from sexual defilement. Thus in the third century there are a number of sources constructing new ritual purity systems, in which sexuality and baptism are the opposite poles. Here Christianity not only reacted to external purification perceptions, but created new systems reflecting the anthropology and cosmology of the new religion.

In the general conclusion, I discuss the consequences of the textual analyses for the overarching theme of the book—how purity and defilement are redefined in early Christianity to support the anthropology, demonology, and theology of second- and third-century communities, and to construct the identity of these communities. I compare the different areas of purity discourse, and attempt to trace the historical development of purity concepts and ideas through the first three centuries of Christianity.
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This study has demonstrated the importance of discourses of purity and defilement for the formation of identities and for understanding the roles of community, ritual, body, and soul among early Christian writers. Far from becoming suddenly irrelevant with Paul or the gospel narratives in the first century, purity—in practice and in speech—was continuously a focus of attention, challenged, negotiated, and redefined by the authors of the second and third centuries. This continuing interest reflected the gradual process of the differentiation of Christian purity discourse from that of Jews and pagans, in parallel with the creation of a differentiated Christian culture more generally. In three major areas of ritual and practice—food, sex, and baptism—purity discourse was instrumental in constructing early Christian identity vis-à-vis Jews and pagans, in negotiating the place of the body in Christian practice and thought, and in developing a new ethic out of existing traditions. Thus, the purity discourse which emerged by the middle of the third century in Origen's writings was already a uniquely Christian amalgam of Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions and of the intense reactions to them by the various Christian communities and factions during the second century. Purity discourse bore much of the brunt of this creative activity, caught as it was in the tension between the continuing use of traditional language and concepts of sacredness, purity, and defilement (whether biblical or pagan) and radically new ideas and practices of salvation for all through the human body and a community requiring conversion and individual consent.

THE MOTIVATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN PURITY DISCOURSE

Two broad motivations, at some tension with each other, drove the creation of Christian purity discourses. The first was a substantive motivation: the creation and maintenance of theories of human nature and ritual coherent with the theological principles of the new religious movement coalescing in this period,
and the integration of purity traditions and concepts into these worldviews and theories. Christian writers were members of insular communities, who perceived themselves as bastions of light in a dark world. Conceptualizing their own conversion and that of the other community members from dark to light, from outsiders to insiders, was a critical part of their self-identity. No less important was creating and justifying the hierarchies of the community itself, both spiritually and socially. These problems were approached by conceptualizing what sin, especially sexual sin, does to a person and to the community and how it can be removed. Images of purity and defilement, providing a model for the interaction of individual body and the community, were central concepts in these conceptualizations.

The second motivation was polemical: construction of Christian identity by laying claim to true purity while marking the purity practices and beliefs of others (Jews, pagans, or “heretics”) as false. For this motivation, the main thrust of purity discourse was not so much creating new hierarchies or concepts, but rather denying the validity of traditional concepts.

In some areas of purity discourse one motivation took precedence over the other. Thus, concerning food and death, polemical interests serving to buttress Christian identity were much more central, while concerning sexuality and baptism, questions of human nature, theology, and ritual theory are paramount. This difference is rooted and reflected in the sources of the language used in each of these areas. Issues of food purity were traditionally used by Second Temple Jewish groups to define themselves against each other; the Christian movement took this instrument to an extreme. With the expansion of the movement into Greco-Roman society, it connected with the common Greco-Roman perception of Jewish food laws as xenophobic and ritualistic. This move probably gained support due to the attempts of some Christian groups to prove themselves superior to others through sexual and dietary asceticism, triggering a counter-move of moderation, in which such practices were considered heretical. The dietary choices of the Jewish food laws were cast as an external and arbitrary mode of purity, as opposed to purity of mind, body, and flesh through sexual choice, and to some extent fasting, which was cast as internal; this dichotomy was opposed to the common philosophical discourse in which dietary and sexual choices were both seen as similarly relevant to individual purity. While sexual abstinence and fasting were common ascetic endeavors in the Greco-Roman world and could therefore relatively easily be co-opted for the Christian project, the Jewish food laws, seemingly arbitrarily marking specific species as impure, were not. As a result, in food issues authors built on the Gospels and on Paul and used them against the purity concepts of the biblical dietary laws. The situation was similar concerning questions of death impurity.

In sexual issues, which were not focused on anti-Jewish polemics but on substantive questions, the opposite was the case: the sexual sin–impurity tradition,
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originating in the Hebrew Bible and amplified in Second Temple writings, was taken up in Paul and second-century writers. Although there were certainly expansions and shifts in the meaning of the concepts, there is continuity of language. This allowed Christian sexual impurity language to reverberate more freely with biblical allusions. In texts discussing baptism, there is little sense of either break or continuity with the Hebrew Bible. Although historically Jewish washings were probably the context for John’s baptisms, early Christian authors ignored this. Rather, baptismal purification language, with its emphasis on knowledge and personal change, drew from biblical penitential images and from Platonic images of self-purification. The language used was also dependent on author. This can be seen especially when comparing Origen to previous writers. In the *Dialogue*, Justin quotes biblical testimonia extensively, but his own purity language is frequently not biblical, and Clement of Alexandria speaks much more of moderation than of purification, hardly using biblical language directly to speak of purity. Origen’s writing, on the other hand, is always interwoven with biblical impurity language (both from the Old and the New Testaments), especially in his exegetical and homiletical works, the vast majority of his extant oeuvre. This lends a very different character to his writing, making purity much more prominent.

Determining whether polemical or substantive motivations are driving the discussion is highly significant. Thus, for example, the description of the relationship between the interior, moral aspects of the person and the exterior bodily aspects is dependent upon the motivation. Concerning food, where the polemical motivation drove the discussion, the central focus of the discourse was of distinction between inner and outer purity. Food purity was cast as external and irrelevant for Christians, for whom only internal purity was relevant, as opposed to Jews, who were interested only in external purity. When we turn to sexual issues, where the discussion is not focused on polemic, authors emphasized not the divide between internal and external, but rather how both are integrated in Christian sexual purity.

THE THEORETICAL BASIS OF CHRISTIAN PURITY DISCOURSE

I now turn to a more detailed examination of these motivations, starting with the substantive. What were the theories on human nature and on ritual at the basis of Christian purity discourse?

The Christian perception of purity was typically that of a battle, in which the pure was totally opposed to the defiled, with no possibility of co-existence. The pure and defiled were not circumscribed to certain clearly defined spheres regulating temporary access to the sacred as in truce conceptions, but were
rather overarching categories, relevant in every time and place. Management of purity and defilement required relating to both ritual and bodily practice, as well as the person's agency, interior faculties, and relationship with supernatural entities. Thus, Christian perceptions of purity and defilement expressly concerned both body and soul, maintaining an integrated ethics of the person as a whole, and yet differentiating between these aspects of the person.

It is impossible to reconstruct a clear trajectory of development of theological and anthropological purity theory through the first three centuries CE: the diversity of authors, interests, and influences does not allow this, and many themes appear in the early second century only to disappear and resurface a century later. Rather than reconstruct a trajectory, we may compare the earliest and the latest authors discussed in the book: early second-century texts with the writings of Origen. In many second-century authors, purity language was unsystematic and ambiguous, frequently used ad hoc to strengthen points. At times it is used in a more technical and defined fashion, but only in one area, e.g., sex in Hermas or the Apocryphal Acts, baptism in the Excerpta ex Theodoto. Only with Origen is there an attempt to transform these traditions on purity into a theological concept that can be generalized across different areas, so that the logic of purification which appears in food issues would cohere with that found in baptism and sex, and with Origen's other principles of theology, exegesis, and human nature.

The theological utility of purity concepts is clearest in Origen's writings. However, the continued use of purity concepts in early Christian writing in general can be ascribed also to internal social-religious reasons. From the second century onwards, the church developed set rituals and hierarchies. The integration of these hierarchies and rituals into an eschatological worldview in which good and evil were in constant battle required a certain "routinization of charisma," a process which was doubtless ongoing throughout the first centuries. Purity concepts were one of the best instruments available to encode this routinization, and yet maintain the sense of duality and battle. This can best be seen in the sexual realm: most of the texts of the second and third centuries which speak of sex as polluted and of sexual abstinence as the purest option do not clearly support total celibacy for all Christians, but only for a minority. A sliding scale of sexual purity allowed them to clearly mark the moral value of different sex practices, but still retain a legitimate space for married Christians. These texts are playing in the space between battle and truce perceptions of purity: sexual pollution is inherently evil, but it can nevertheless be lived with, as long as it is marked as such. Thus on both the theological and the practical level, the substantive aspect of purity discourse offered welcome slippage, allowing a hierarchy of practice not directly linked to that of sin.

The purity discourses of both pagan and Jewish religions were themselves highly complex and in continuous flux. As seen in the first chapter, several systems were at play, including tolerated or temporary impurities, prohibited
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or sin impurity, and ascetic purity. Purity discourses may be better described as webs of allusions rather than as systems, even if some texts sought to systemize them. Therefore Christian purity discourse (itself multiform) cannot be seen as a reaction or adoption of any one purity system. Rather, inasmuch as Christian purity discourse related to the discourses of other religions, it selected (consciously or not) certain elements to be attacked and rejected, or, alternatively, adopted and integrated.

The process of selection differed significantly in each of the areas examined. As concerns pagan purity discourse on defilement or purity of food and death, there is hardly any adoption or rejection (though it is reasonable to assume significant continuity in terms of purity practice, not discussed in the texts). Concerning sexuality and baptism there is more awareness of continuity: both the Pseudo-Clementines and Origen argue for the importance of sexual purity from the consensus on it in all religious systems, and Justin is aware of the similarities between pagan washing rituals and baptism, though for him this is a problem rather than an asset. The main borrowing of purity discourse from Greco-Roman religions concerned Platonic conceptions of human nature through which asceticism was explained. Thus, the bifurcation of body and soul and the purification of the latter from the former was in the background of descriptions of baptism as purificatory enlightenment and of sexual asceticism as freeing the soul from the strictures of the body. And yet, in both baptism and sexuality, a simple dualism does not explain purification since for many texts not only the soul but also the body was purified or defiled. This problem of religious action as purifying the soul or the person as a whole is inherent in the Platonic tradition, and is found also in second- and third-century pagan Neoplatonists.

CHRISTIAN PURITY DISCOURSE AS A RESPONSE TO JEWISH PURITY DISCOURSE

The relationship with Jewish purity discourses was more explicit. Most Christian purity discourse on baptism, food, and death from the second century on was based on constructing a “true” purity practice of Christians, opposed to a “false” Jewish one; the former is interior, intentional, and thus involves the essence of the person as an agent, while the latter is external, automatic, and the person is only instrumental. Although a distinction between moral/spiritual and ritual/bodily purity for polemical purposes was found in Jewish, Greek, and Latin literature, it is only with early Christianity that this distinction became a cornerstone of purity discourse. All purity laws and practices were seen through the lens of the battle perception of purity, and from this viewpoint it was easy to attack Jewish practices as irrelevant, insufficiently invested in defeating evil.
This construction was not an accurate reflection of reality, first because Jews had various conceptions of impurity as concerning sin or the interior of the person, but also because Christians, too, believed in certain dimensions of defilement which could not be clearly linked to sin, or which were exterior rather than internal. Nevertheless, it is true that in Christianity defilement as an aspect of sin was dominant, while in Judaism we find various types of defilement, some linked to sin and some not.

Despite this polemical construction of an opposition between Jewish and Christian purity conceptions, dimensions of impurity in Judaism which were linked to sin, and therefore more compatible with the battle perception, were integrated into Christian discourse. This is seen especially in sexual defilement and to a lesser extent in baptism. In these cases, the defilement of sin, which in the Hebrew Bible and in Second Temple period literature was considered non-purifiable (for the most part) or purifiable only by sacrifice (in specific cases), received a new ritual formulation. In the case of baptism, prophetic calls for repentance, expressed through images of washing in water, were joined to actual washings for purification from temporary defilements, to create a new ritual of initiation and purification from sin. In the case of sexual relations, sexual sin was reconceptualized as a defilement of the person of the sinner (both body and soul). More radically, marital sexual relations were redefined by many Christians as a defilement of the person, with the body at the focus of this defilement. This focus on the body as the source and expression of defilement was an expression of the rise of ascetic purity, in which defilement was no longer a temporary issue (in the case of tolerated defilements) or an unusual one (in the case of prohibited defilements), but a perennial question, accompanying all embodied souls in search for salvation. In this framework, new types of purificatory rituals were called for: rituals which perpetually divided a select group from the rest of humanity through personal transformation, rather than rituals which allowed occasional and relatively non-committal meetings with the divine. The roots for this transformation can be seen already in Second Temple period writings, where the purity of Israel as a select group is considered to be expressed ritually in the laws of food or sex.

The development of Christian purity discourse of the second and third centuries may be compared also with contemporary rabbinic discourse. Here it is difficult to make a case for borrowing or rejection, and the comparison is rather of structural similarities and differences. Both the Christian writers and the Rabbis were attempting to formulate a purity discourse for their respective communities in the Roman Empire, and for both the Hebrew Bible had a central role in its development. The different starting points of the two are obvious: for the Rabbis, the biblical impurity systems were valid and compulsory, and at least those parts which were relevant without a temple still to be practiced. For the Christian writers they were generally not valid (with the exception of the defilement of genital emissions). Nevertheless, the recent book by Mira Balberg...
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(2014), which links rabbinic purity discourse as found in the Mishna to Greco-Roman ideologies of self-control and self-knowledge, provides a starting point for thinking also of similarities (see above p. 57).

As Balberg herself notes, the innovative rabbinic focus on the consciousness of the subject in the transmission of impurity is paralleled by Paul's subjectivization of impurity. This is even more developed in Clement's and Origen's ideas of how impurity of food offered to idols is dependent on the subject's consciousness. However, this parallel also highlights the difference: for Origen, impurity (of this kind at least) is created only by conscious beings; for the Rabbis, impurity is created by natural, non-conscious bodily events.

A related claim of Balberg's is that the Rabbis refocus purity discourse, from the purity rules themselves to the person who maintains them, i.e., to the formation of the subject. In this respect, too, there is a parallel with the asceticization of Christian purity discourse. Although some Christian authors prefer to use Greco-Roman philosophical language of moderation to describe self-attention, self-formation, and social order, I have documented here the many second- and third-century writers who use purity discourse originating from the sphere of radical sexual renunciation. While in the Jewish case purity discourse moves from the dominant ritual sphere to that of the individual psyche, in the Christian case it comes from the sphere of the defilement of sin, bringing with it its radicalism and dualism, which is generally lacking in the Jewish parallel.

Issues of community borders are also comparable. For Balberg, the Rabbis oversee a move from a focus on the values inside the purity system (i.e., whether a thing or person is pure or not) to a focus on the question of participation in the system in the first place (i.e., whether a thing or person can become pure/impure or not). For the Rabbis, gentiles—like non-artificial objects—do not participate in the system, and they cannot become either pure or impure. The Rabbis are interested in circumscribing the significance of the purity system to a select group only. The Christians draw the line differently, making a universal claim: all humans can either become defiled or be purified, and demons serve to widen this even further.

DEMONS AND IMPURITY

In many of the texts surveyed, demons and impurity are closely linked. Though this link has roots in both Jewish Second Temple literature and Greco-Roman culture, its centrality and explicitness is unique to early Christian thought. In earlier thought demons generally acted independently of the human psyche; here, they were transformed into agents of pollution, intruders into the essentially positive or neutral human psyche. One reason for this development was
the transformation of the pagan gods, with their pollution inherited from Jewish literature, into demons. For the more systematic thinkers, however, demons were useful as pollutants because they could cross and blur the boundaries of cosmological and human hierarchies, yet leave the system intact without undermining the primacy of human subjectivity as the source of moral value; a similar process occurred among pagan Neoplatonic thinkers.

**BROADER CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions of this study have wider implications, beyond the question of the development of purity concepts. First, in the discussion of the place of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism and Greco-Roman religions, purity has typically been an area which exemplified the change Christianity wrought: from ritual to moral, from external to internal. Our analysis demonstrates that this perception of a break, though not unfounded, has been much amplified by the interests of Christian polemics, and finds significant threads of continuity between ancient purity conceptions and those of Christianity. As in many other areas, so too concerning purity issues Christian writers did not discard the concepts of ancient religions, but adapted them to suit their new worldview. Purity conceptions and practices serve universal social-religious needs: the creation and maintenance of hierarchy and identity by a delineation of the place of the sacred. These needs were no less (and at times more) pressing in early Christianity than in the religions surrounding it, and therefore purity concepts could not be dispensed with.

Second, the divide between external and internal, ritual and moral, is a product of a critical, polemical viewpoint, rather than a neutral and objective one. Moral meanings of rituals as distinct from the rituals themselves are rarely contemplated in societies in which the rituals are totally unproblematic; this is as true of the Hebrew prophets or Greek sceptics as of early Christians. However, while the former called upon these distinctions when speaking to their own religious group, the Christians (and other late ancient religions) used them against groups from which they were differentiating themselves; this created the danger of a double standard, in which the moral/ritual distinction was applied only to the rituals of others, not to their own rituals. In Christianity, the polemical distinction accompanied the upheaval and eventual demise of the former cultic systems, and was integrated into the emerging Christian thought-world. Christian ritual thought thus crystallized around a basic tension, between the realities of ritual as exterior happenings and the idea of a ritual/moral, external/internal divide.

The study comes to its conclusion with Origen, as the culmination of trends which gathered strength from the first to the third centuries. But in many
respects, Origen is also the inaugurator of a new period in the redefinition of purity and defilement. Looking forward to the fourth and fifth centuries, purity discourse continues to develop. The flourishing of the monastic movement brought radical sexual and alimentary asceticism, serving to purify the individual, to the center of attention. The extensive literature on these subjects continued to develop the theoretical and practical perspectives of purification through asceticism. In parallel, the advancement of church hierarchy, architecture, and rituals meant that baptism and eucharist became more intricate and structured rituals, with significant purity dimensions. These developments, which set the tone for the status of purity in the late ancient and medieval church, are rooted in the redefinition of purity and defilement formulated in the writings of the second- and third-century writers.
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