

Ritual Weapons

Islamist Purity Practices in Cairo

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My interest in the purity practices of Cairo's "Islamist" community was first sparked in June 2005, during a conversation with Amr, a young bank employee from one of Cairo's poorer southern suburbs.¹ Amr told me that before listening to his cassette sermons he often liked to perform a minor ritual ablution (*wudu'*). At the time, this seemed rather strange. According to Sunni purity law (*fiqh al-taharah*), Muslims should only perform *wudu'* if they wish to pray (or touch their Qurans or perform Hajj) but have incurred a minor ritual impurity (*hadath*)—a state precipitated through any number of morally neutral, biologi-

Sunni purity law outlines conditions under which a minor ritual ablution (*wudu'*) before prayer, should be performed. Though these conditions are usually understood to be biologically inevitable acts, Islamists in Cairo have reinterpreted the ritual into one that stresses moral purity. The author explains this innovation by exploring the mindset of the Islamists, who perceive themselves to live in a morally corrupt society and under attack from a variety of enemies. Ritual ablution thereby becomes a tool through which the Islamists can maintain moral superiority and draw boundaries between themselves and their opponents.

customers the entire truth about our product, we wouldn't be able to sell if we did!"

If they know that purification from deceit is not legally necessary, why do some Islamists choose to do this anyway? The following reason suggests itself. With government spies skulking on the peripheries of their groups, a certain amount of deception—to police, even to family and friends—is often advisable for Islamists. Yet, as several lamented, while such constant deception is not a sin *per se*, it is morally and psychologically draining. It is in light of such feelings that their need

cally inevitable acts, such as falling asleep or visiting the toilet. When I pointed this out to Amr, he admitted knowing that his extra purification was not legally obligatory, but added that he liked to perform *wudu'* whenever he felt the need "to get close to God." By the same logic, he explained, whenever certain emotional and/or moral states, such as sexual desire, made him feel like he was "straying away from God," he would perform *wudu'* to close the gap.

Intrigued by Amr's somewhat unorthodox approach, during the following twelve months I conducted interviews with 32 male Islamists on matters of ritual (and moral) purity. Generally speaking, most were like Amr: middle-class professionals living in and around Cairo's busy suburbs.² This paper briefly summarizes my findings and makes some tentative observations on the reasons behind the Islamists' purity practices. Methodologically, I begin with the assumption that some of these practices uphold key aspects of the Islamists' ideology. In so doing, however, these actors merge the categories of ritual and moral purity in a fashion that the early Sunni jurists would not have anticipated. Further, unlike those of the jurists, who generally disconnected ritual practice from all social factors, the Islamists' purity practices clearly reflect profound anxieties regarding their three main opponents: the corrupt Egyptian state, sexually aggressive females, and villainous Jews.

"Dirty lies"

Some Islamists perform *wudu'* if they have knowingly deceived others. Of those I interviewed, 15 admitted that they sometimes repeated their *wudu'* after lying. Two brothers who work as salesmen for a large company were particularly diligent in this regard. While correctly noting that deceit is not a legal form of *hadath*, and that it is not mandatory for them to perform *wudu'* after deceiving someone, they went on to explain (with no shortage of humour) that the nature of their work nevertheless compels them to do this: "it's part of our job not to tell

to repeat *wudu'* after lying should be understood. Echoing Amr, my interviewees explained to me that through *wudu'*, they endeavour to shrug off the corrupt and defiling political reality that suffocates them and move closer to God. At the same time, I would add, the same practice consolidates their commitment to their own (ritually and morally pure) group.

"Filthy looks"

Cairenes in general attribute a great deal of importance to matters of sexual ethics and gender. A different survey shows that, after becoming sexually aroused, most Cairene Muslims repeat their *wudu'* for prayer. This is significant: by attributing danger to sexual arousal in a ritual context—directly connecting *hadath* with lust (*shahwah*)—Cairenes signal their wish that traditional gender norms and values not be forgotten. Not surprisingly, such concerns are even more prevalent in the highly gender conscious domains of Islamist discourse and practice. Indeed, while most Cairenes believe that their own lust may affect their readiness for prayer, to the Islamists, other people's lust appears to be a greater source of worry. Representing the extreme, nine of my interviewees admitted to repeating their ablutions when looked at by a woman they suspected to be permissive (*haiga*). Because most live and work in areas where foreign women rarely go, they conceded that defiling encounters like this are unusual. When they do happen, however, they acknowledged that a foreign (and specifically Western) woman—deemed more likely to dress and behave provocatively than an Egyptian woman—is likely to be involved. In fact, virtually all the Islamists (and not merely this purity-minded minority) agreed that Western women are known to be sexually promiscuous and thus to be avoided at all costs.

Once again, the idea that a promiscuous gaze can defile a Muslim runs counter to anything one finds in the Islamic legal texts. (It may be, of course, that the Islamist purifies himself because of the lust *he* experiences at the sight of such women; yet, this was not what was said.) As in the previous example, the Islamists' unusual application of ritual purity ideas directly reflects a social theme that is of fundamental importance to them. Wary of the power sexual desire holds over most people, in Islamist communities, unmarried or unrelated males and females occupy very different social spheres. When they do meet, a chaperone (*mahrim*) must be present. For my interviewees, the need for renewed ritual purification after being looked at by a "dirty woman" (*weskha*) stems from their conviction that only gender segregation, and not (Western-style) integration, brings societal harmony and moral decency.

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"Rotten Jews"

While foreign females present perhaps the most significant threat to a male Islamist's purity (and peace of mind), several of my respondents claimed that they would also perform wudu' if they came into physical contact with a Jew. Indeed, as unlikely as it would be while walking down a Cairene high street to find oneself hailed by someone identifiably Jewish, 21 of the Islamists agreed that, were this to occur and physical contact be made, they would repeat their purifications before prayers. One young man captured the general feeling: "Jews may not be impure like blood or excrement, but they are morally filthy and we know that they don't look after themselves [in terms of personal hygiene]. They cannot be trusted and they hate Muslims. If I touched one, I would probably perform wudu' just in case I lost my purity (*ehtyati fi halit low faqadt taharti*)."

For this individual, that Jews may not be substantively impure (*najis*) is irrelevant. The combination of moral filthiness and poor standards of hygiene render them ritually defiling. Here, once again, the Islamists challenge standard Muslim readings of the law: the overwhelming majority of the Sunni jurists reject the idea that any human being, regardless of religion, race or gender, is in essence defiling. The notion that a Jewish person—a member of the *ahl al-kitab* who has his own stringent purity laws—is capable of polluting a Muslim seems to be particularly unusual and recent.³

Not surprisingly, current political circumstances help considerably to explain the Islamists' suspicions regarding the Jew's ritual purity status. In their view, Israel (with the support of the West) has already inflicted a series of emasculating blows to the pride of the Muslim *Umma* and is constantly seeking an opening for further attack. In the standard Islamic account, enmity between the two peoples stretches back to the beginning of Islam, when the Jews ravished Muslim women and persecuted the Prophet and he, in retaliation, expelled them from Medina. In light of the Israeli invasion of Sinai (1967) and ongoing treatment of the Palestinians, the Egyptian Islamists are convinced that a second expulsion of the Jews is now necessary. Emerging from Islamist discussions as a cartoon-villain, the Jew is thoroughly deceitful and promiscuous—doubly impure according to the logic of purity at work here—and intent on the destruction of Muslims in all places and at all times. The preoccupation of Islamists with such matters has been well documented. Here, it remains only to note that certain Islamists move beyond the confines of the Sunni Islamic legal code to articulate their fears of Jews in terms of ritual purity.

Final observations

Cairo's Islamists perceive themselves as under attack from a variety of enemies. As the cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas notes, when a community perceives itself to be under attack, the physical body is often treated as a canvass upon which "the powers and dangers credited to social structure" may be reproduced.⁴ Given Douglas' insight, it should not come as a complete surprise that some Islamists think in these ways. Indeed, in a politically corrupt environment, one in which men and women are increasingly likely to mix (in schools, cinemas, work places, even mosques), and where Israel is allowed to continue trampling on Muslim honour, it makes perfect sense to many of these men that a lie, a lascivious look, and contact with the enemy should be so dangerous as to require some form of physical "purification."

Key to their reading of purity is the Islamists' peculiar and poetic vision of wudu'. In these circles, the minor ablution is far more than a mere gateway allowing Muslims to move back and forth between the states of readiness and unreadiness for prayer; rather, it is the first step in a journey made five times daily towards God. The symbolism of the ritual wash is especially potent: my interviewees invariably emphasizing how, as the water slid from their bodies, their sins were also transported away. If a Muslim performs wudu' properly, they agreed, he feels at peace and ready to meet his God. As numerous Hadith illustrate, the spiritual and symbolic richness of Islam's purifications was well understood by the early Muslims (who made the same observations).⁵ By granting wudu' the power to expunge sins, however, Egypt's modern Islamists expand the legal category of *hadath* to include the moral sins of lying and promiscuity therein. In so doing, they transform the nature of Sunni Islam's ritual purity system, rendering it a ritual mechanism for defence (and potentially attack). This sets an interesting, though conceivably problematic precedent.⁶



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In most other respects, the ritual purity practices of Egypt's Islamists are no different from those of other Muslims in the city. Outside the ritual sphere, however, ideas of purity and impurity seem to occur far more often during the conversations of Egypt's Islamists than those of average Egyptians. Time and again, "dirty politicians," "polluting behaviour," and "filthy Jews" are contrasted with the "pure hearts," "pure women," and "pure believers" of the Islamist community. Residing in a heretical state, surrounded by symbols of the perverse Western/Jewish culture, Amr and his friends feel as if they occupy a community within a community. Their purity practices and beliefs bolster and protect Cairo's Islamists against their numerous enemies.

Performing Wudu'

Notes

1. The term "Islamist" is open to a variety of interpretations. Here, I follow Muhammad Hafez's general definition: "Islamists are individuals, groups, organizations, and parties that see in Islam a guiding political doctrine that justifies and motivates collective action on behalf of the doctrine," M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), 4.
2. I spoke to doctors, engineers, computer scientists, teachers, two students, and two un-employed.
3. In contrast, the Quran describes the polytheist as "impure" (*najisun*) (9:28), a verse which only the Shia interpret literally.
4. M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Penguin, 1970), 93.
5. See e.g. Malik, *Al-Muwatta'*, trans. Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley (London: Kegan Paul, 1989), "Taharah" 6:31. Not surprisingly, this idea is most developed within Sufi tradition.
6. Occasionally made by some early figures, the connection between ritual purity and sin was systematically rejected by the Sunni jurists, see R. Gauvain, "Ritual Rewards: A Consideration of Three Recent Approaches to Sunni Purity Law" *Islamic Law and Society* 12, no. 3 (2005): 384–86.

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