

PURITY AND DANGER

The SPECTRA platform of the Layish website concerns itself with the astonishingly durable continuities of tradition from ancient times into the present day. This particular newsletter considers the perennial theme of purity and the sense of danger arising from threats to that purity - from an anthropological point of view popularly raised as an issue in Professor Mary Douglas' best-seller, *Purity and Danger*. From the most ancient traditions to current religion, there have always been concerns about contamination that are not simply to do with being clean, but of maintaining cultural norms - or even the survival of a people. The concept does not just apply to religions but is a deep and perennial psychological instinct.

Below, in summary terms I refer to some examples from the far past (you will be able individually to add more precise detail, I am sure) to see how their principles might apply to the current world situation - and why we are justified, still, in trying to protect particular purities that matter most to us. To take one example, in modern Iran today local teenagers ride their motorbikes all over the Zoroastrian sacred High Places, or Towers of Silence, where the dead are laid out to be discarnated by the birds before burial. Such desecration by one religion of another is intolerable. That it happens indicates an absence of spirituality in those who claim to be religious - and there is a difference between the two.

WASHING

Jewish standards of cleanliness in the kitchen make life hard for the Jewish housewife now we have disinfectants, but the rules survive from millennia ago before germs or bacteria were known of: only that there was some connection between staying clean and staying healthy. The symbolism of washing the body as a step in cleansing the soul of sin and imperfections is as old as history - for Christianity the first rite for introducing a person to the community is to baptise them by pouring water over them or even immersing them. It is based on the Baptism of Christ who stepped down in the River Jordan, overseen by John the Baptist - the point at which the Holy Spirit entered Him. For Muslims, before making their prayer they must be ritually clean, which means not only that they must wash hands, feet and face at least, but also that they have not recently passed wind or had sexual intercourse - both of which vitiate ritual purity. One needs to think here of the desert living conditions of most of the core Muslim world where it would be unreasonable to expect people to have a bath. For Hindus, immersion in one of the sacred rivers of India, especially the Ganges, is absolutely central to the washing away of the scars of karma. In recent times it has been known for immigrant Hindus in London to cast the ashes of their loved ones into the Thames River instead -Bronze Age and Iron Age Britons before them threw votive offerings into the same river.

Impurity is experienced when not being able to keep these rules.

EATING

Rules concerning allowable and non-allowable meat (shared by Jews and Muslims) must go back to how quickly some kinds (like pork) go bad, especially in a hot climate. (It is a fallacy to say pigs are dirty: like hippos they need to wallow in mud to stop getting sunburned, since they have no fur. If a farmer keeps them in filthy conditions it is nothing to do with the nature of the pig.) Another reason put forward for the ban on pork is that, of all other animals it is the closest to human flesh, and that eating it is too close to cannibalism for comfort. It may also be a gesture differentiation between Semites and Indo-Europeans who over a long history made the ritual boar hunt a proclamation of self-identity. There must be original reasons behind the dietary taboos of any religion that go back to the earliest history and are then retained

despite original conditions no longer pertaining. Nowadays we see all sorts of variation on food taboos - with the vegetarians joining the Hindus in not eating meat because the blood in it brings a person under Tamas, or the principle of heaviness and apathy (circumvented by Jews and Muslims who cut the throat of their meat and drain out the blood before eating). With modern New Age movements millions of Europeans follow combinations of vegetarian, fruitarian, protein-only etc. diets where the substances they do not eat are considered harmful to overall vitality. Overall, one needs to consider things such as - if a Muslim or Jew has now moved to a cold climate where different food predominates, do they need strictly to keep to the old rules, or should they consider the Spirit of the Law and adapt accordingly? Nonetheless, few dare to brave the general community by changing, though I do have Jewish friends who eat bacon.

Impurity is experienced when not being able to keep these rules when in mixed social situations, as in the case of Muslim or Jew at a dinner forced to eat non-kosher/halal meat.

DRINKING

The drinking culture of the Germanic peoples, including the Anglo-Saxons, is a hard one to undo, given so many social practices are associated with alcohol, such as making a toast, making a vow, celebrating the central events of life, as well as a general liking for parties. Yet Jews and Persians traditionally have celebrated the benefits of wine and do not shy away from it (the first vines were grown in the Middle East, and Persian poetry celebrates spiritual intoxication in terms of being drunk). But the Arab world on the whole shuns alcohol, viewing it as a decadence and a horror with too many dangers - and looking at the behaviour of many in the West today, they could be right! But there is a long tradition in world religions of the Sacred Drink, whether of the Haoma/Soma of the Indo-Iranians, the Beer of the Sumerian New Year celebrations, or the wine that stands for the Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Again, each tradition has its rules due to historical conditions and familiar material analogies close to hand - but due also to 'policy change' in reaction against practices which appear to have become harmful because pursued to excess.

Danger is experienced when not being able to follow these rules, due to a clash of drinking codes. But I have Muslim friends who will join a group of friends in the pub - and simply drink fruit juice or water. After all, many non-Muslims do not like alcohol and choose to be teetotal.

PURITY OF RACE AND COMMUNITY

Jews and Hindus are remarkable in having more or less been able over centuries - even millennia - to maintain racial purity so as to maintain the cultural identity of their people unpolluted by contradictory codes of life. Today the gene scientists tell us that diversity keeps the human genome healthy and of course it is well-known too much inbreeding can lead to deformities - or ideologically to the kind of fanaticism proclaimed by the Nazis concerning Āryan racial purity. Nonetheless, maintaining continuity of type over the generations is surely a right, since it usually makes life culturally smoother and is part of tribe identity. I notice this particularly in the Hindu families I know who seem to have found a balanced way of keeping up their own traditions at home while, as it were, wearing a cultural mackintosh when taking part in the big bad world outside.

Danger is experienced when admixture of a different race entails the break-up of family norms. Can a country insist on integration which entails people of different traditions all living next to each other in one block of flats, or one street? I maintain there has been bullying on the part of many western governments who insist so much on integration that everyone loses out in being able to practise their own customs, including the host population itself. If we take the situation of the average working-class English family

where the wives used to chat with each other over the garden wall and mutually agree to do laundry on Mondays and polish their front door step on a Friday, in a mixed street this no longer happens and families avoid each other instead. Some of the most successful communities are those like Chinatown in London and San Francisco - or of the Hindus in the London suburb of Southall where, all the wives, all the husbands and most of the children are all on the same page. This is not to say mixed communities do not work - but they usually do so at higher levels of education. Government political correctness goes so ridiculously far that we are no longer allowed to tell jokes light-heartedly making fun of other people, including ourselves - what happened to Irish jokes, and now when certain people are made fun of, they might kill in retaliation!

IMMIGRATION

When a region is invaded wholesale by another people, it is perfectly normal for the host nation, even while holding out their arms in compassion, to wish to maintain their identity - and it is their right. At certain historical turning points such a right has been completely steam-rolled - as in the case of the Norman Conquest in Britain when Saxon property was brutally taken over by the French and a totally new identity stamped on the face of the country, North to South (for 300 years the administrative language was French, not English). We can, of course think of more modern examples without too much difficulty, but keeping to Britain and Europe in general, with the invasion from a troubled Middle East of peoples following very different cultural rules, the issue of Purity -v- Danger is now a cultural issue writ large. If these peoples abuse Europe's hospitality by conspiring to take over - like the Normans - then this time the descendants of Britons, Saxons and Vikings will, very quietly, insist on retaining their cultural identity while at the same time working to find ways to avoid the obvious clashes to do with food, drink, and treating other people, especially women.

In this situation on both sides danger is experienced to the purity of an entire way of life - despite some contradictions:

- Much of Western society (on the surface) is atheist - actually people have inherited the core norms of religion (helping the poor, abhorring murder) without realising it;
- Much of Western society is pluralist, able to absorb people of other faiths or ideology as long as the central 'tree trunk' of the prime fostering culture retains the core liberal outlook that allows specificity to remain within individual groups, leaving them free to follow their own beliefs;
- Most of British society is itself descended from invading races - but they were all Indo-European so not too different from each other (the Normans were a branch of the Vikings).

Nonetheless, the populations of countries like France, Belgium, Germany, Britain, are unhappy about their compassion towards immigrants being taken advantage of by an ensuing alien cultural hostility that diminishes that broad view and endangers their cultural assumptions. There are ways round this, and I think they will in the end succeed. In the end, when I get infuriated by the boringness of English people I am relieved I have some variety of attitude from my international friends that gives a buzz to life.

SPIRIT -V- MATTER

The greatest danger in being born as a human is to confuse Spirit with Matter. One of the great primordial religions, Zoroastrianism, dates back at least to the Neolithic millennia when mankind began to measure time against the movement of the stars and planets. By the time we come to its more tangible manifestation in the archaeological record - in Margiana, Central Asia, on the borders of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, we come across the apparatus of a religion intent on purity, much concerned with the split between Spirit/*Ahuramazda* and Matter/*Ahriman*. The mountains of Afghanistan are territory rich in precious metals and semi-precious stones - hence a later generation of astronomer-Wise Men, recognising

from conjunctions in the sky that the time had come for a new Saviour to be born (God incarnate, which in fact is what every human being is), bring previous gifts to the Christ-child in Palestine (more of this in a future newsletter concerning the connections between certain Magi and Plato in the 5C BC).

At the site of Togolok-24 in Bactria in the foothills where Afghanistan merges with Turkmenistan, the remains of the second-millennium Proto-Zoroastrian temple walls there were all painted white, with huge ablution pools sited nearby. So intent were they on not polluting Mother Earth that anyone who died was left outside, for their corrupting flesh to be eaten by the vultures before their bones were eventually buried (they were the first environmentalists). And there were the remains of fire altars (I have visited the Zoroastrian temple in Yazd, Iran, where the flame has been burning, unquenched, for hundreds of years).

LIGHT -V- DARKNESS

The Zoroastrian religion has lain in the background for thousands of years as the ground-swell of all other European and Near-Eastern religions, uncompromising in its split between what is Spirit (Goodness) and what is mere Matter divorced from Spirit (Evil). Even without any instruction, humans today still naturally come up with this ultimate opposition working through Existence. The Cathars of mediaeval France followed a form of Christianity that maintained this extreme polarity - seeing even the procreation of children as bringing a soul into Matter and to be avoided if possible. In the monotheistic religions overall, the light of Ahuramazda is God, and the darkness of Ahriman is Satan. In current world events today the symbolism of the struggle between Light and Dark continues to be turned to, and ordinary people will automatically label certain events as 'Pure Evil' (actually a contradiction in terms!). At the Carol Service of Nine Lessons at King's College, Cambridge every year, the first verses of the Gospel of St John are read as the last Lesson describing the Creation of the World from that Light 'which the Darkness comprehendeth not'.

No-one can avoid encountering these contrasts in everyday life - they are part of life - and individually a person has the right, if not a duty, *to fight for the Light*, however innocuously and on however innocuous a front it might be. This does not involve exterminating people who follow a different tradition, but just keeping your end up. Wherever you are, there is an issue you are confronting which requires thought and action in terms of Light -v- Dark. At whatever level, if your life is in danger and you fear for your purity, there is much you can do invisibly, secretly, and in silence - or indeed publicly. Being bullied out of your own code is Ahriman at work, not Ahuramazda! Your effort to keep the light on, however tiny, counts. You may never know how much it counts, but small links can make very long chains.

'See [deal with] what is before thy sight, and what is hidden will be revealed'. Deal with the situation and the outcome may surprise you. Purity and Danger are live issues, here to stay, every day.