

# Environmental Purity and Cleanliness: An Islamic Perspective

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## Abstract

*This paper will attempt to investigate those rules and principles which have directed the manners of the upkeep and the preservation of the environment quality and hygiene by Muslims. The Glorious Qur'an, the Prophet's traditions (Sunna), old practices and legislations adopted by Muslims will represent the major sources for such an investigation. It was found that the Islamic jurisprudence had recognized the importance of purity, cleanliness, and hygiene of the environment and its various elements. It had established rules for the protection of "public health" from pollutants long before other cultures. This paper illustrates the great detail in which those rulings were put as they relate to water, earth, foods, drinks, and types of pollutants.*

**Key Words:** Purity, cleanliness, hygiene, environment, water.

In the Islamic ideology, environmental cleanliness is directly tied with the concept of purity. This concept is envisioned to encompass cleanliness in addition to many other conditions and stipulations necessary to qualify the human body and the environment and its elements to perform predefined tasks.

The concept of purity is noted for its importance in Islam when we realize that Jurisprudents list it as the first chapter in their books, only to be followed by chapters on prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage.<sup>1,2</sup>

Also purity has its comprehensive meaning which covers tangible and intangible interpretations.<sup>3</sup> The tangible interpretation is divided into real; such as the purity of the body, place, or clothes; and legal such as ablution.<sup>4</sup> The intangible interpretation covers the purity of one's heart, and the purity of money by alms-giving.<sup>3</sup>

Purity derives its legality, which furnished it with continuity and validity in the Muslim society, from, the Qur'an, the Prophet's traditions, and scholars' consensus. The following discussion will attempt to illustrate how deeply rooted the concept of purity is within those resources, through exposing the wealth of numerous derivations, applications, legislations

and minute details developed by jurists and scholars. Such details demonstrate a relatively advanced sense of understanding and appreciation for the behavior of natural elements and the way they affect human health and hygiene.

## The concept of purity in the Glorious Qur'an

An overall review for the Qur'anic verses illustrates the dominance of the terms "Pure" and "Purity" when referring to the meanings of clean and cleanliness, respectively. Those terms were located in 31 locations, encompassing 19 derivations, in 17 chapters in the Qur'an. The term clean (Nadhif in Arabic) and its various derivations were not spotted at all.<sup>5</sup>

The reference to physical purity prevailed in more than half of those 31 locations followed by the symbolic purity from idols' worshipping and lie telling, the purity of heart and money, and the purity from adultery. The following verses represent a sample for those four meanings:

1. "For Allah loves those who turn to him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean".<sup>6</sup>
2. "And We covenanted with Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it around, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer)".<sup>7</sup>
3. "Of their goods take alms, That so you may Purify and sanctify them".<sup>8</sup>
4. "They said, drive out the followers of Lūṭ from your city: these are indeed men who want to be clean and pure!".<sup>9</sup>

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### The concept of purity in the Prophet's traditions (Sunna)

The Prophet's traditions (Sunna) represent the strong and explanatory continuity for the Qur'an. This becomes obvious with all the rulings and applications pertaining to the cleanliness of the body, clothes, and places in addition to the specifications set for the cleanser or purifier, which is represented, mostly, by water.

Among the Prophet's sayings (Aḥādīth) in this regard are:

"Purity is half of faith".<sup>10</sup>

"The deeds of my nation were presented to me. I found amongst the best, the removal of dirt from the road. I found amongst the worst, the mucus (spit) in the Mosque does not get buried".<sup>11</sup>

Another Ḥadīth described those who void excrement in people's roads and shades as those who are cursed by people.<sup>12</sup> In another direction, numerous Aḥādīth praise or request taking measures for enhancing the purity of the body and clothes.<sup>13</sup>

### The concept of purity in the rulings of the predecessors

The rulings of the predecessors have handled the topic of purity, as it relates to humans and the environment, with an amazing detail. Their rulings and specifications indicate a very keen sense of experimental understanding of the nature and behavior of intruding materials when they come in touch with environment's major elements: 1) the human body, 2) clothes, 3) space (including earth and air), and 4) water.

Those intruding substances were defined as "pollutants" in the modern sense. Such pollutants, when united with any of the above four elements, would negate its qualification or fitness for performing prayers; or its worthiness for human consumption in the form of water, liquid food, or cooked food.

The Islamic law classified types of filths or pollutants according to a set of criteria and scales which were handled by the books of jurisprudence more than eight centuries ago. Such classification together with the ensuing implications and applications are widely scattered throughout those sources.

For the sake of this study, the author has gone

Figure -1- Types of Filths (Impurities)

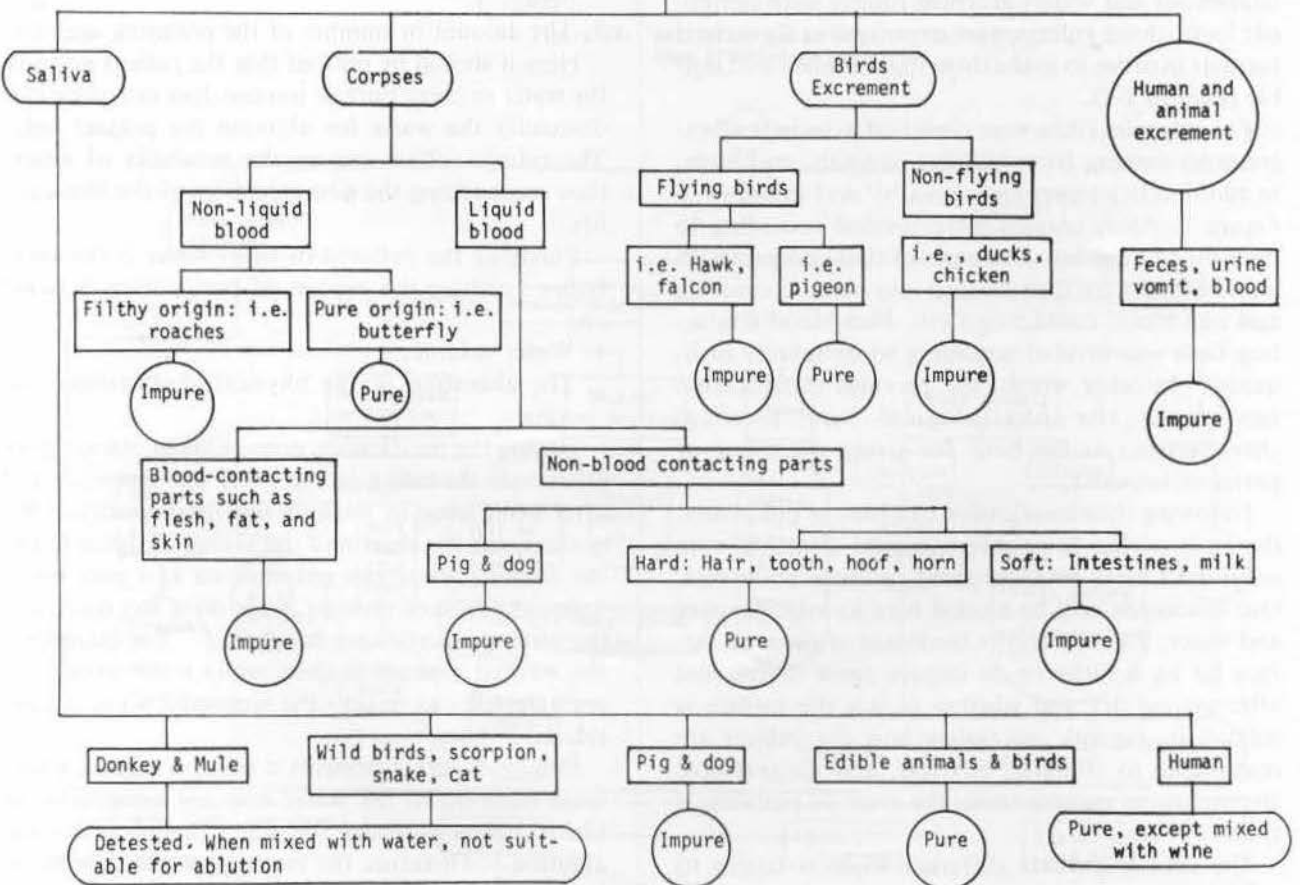
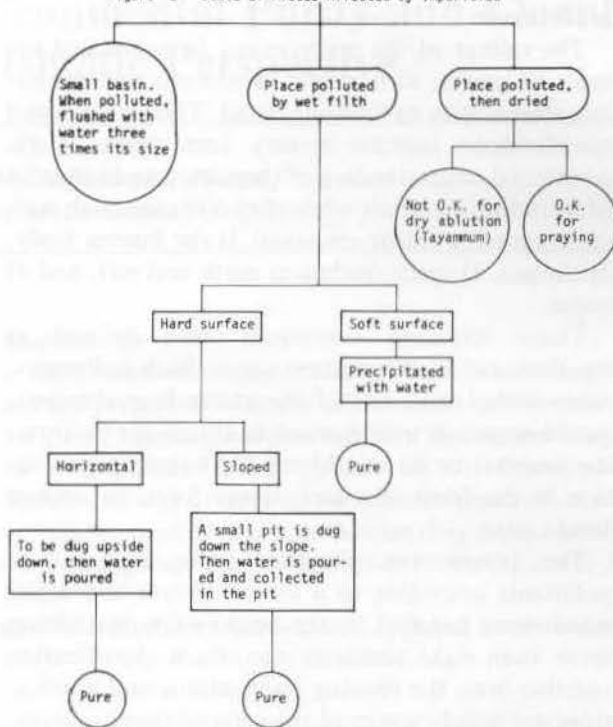


Figure -2- State of Places Affected By Impurities



through the process of compiling those rulings, classifications, and applications relevant to environmental cleanliness and purity. Only the unanimous and widely accepted rulings were compiled. Next, those rulings were organized in flow chart formats in order to make them more explicit and legible (Figures 1-7).

For example, filths were classified to include all excrements coming from humans, animals, and birds, in addition to corpses and saliva,<sup>2,14</sup> and as shown in Figure 1. Also, corpses were divided according to their blood liquidity. The parts of those corpses with liquid blood were then divided into blood contacting and non-blood contacting flesh. Non-blood contacting flesh was divided according to its solidity or liquidity. In other words, the previous classification considered the physiological and physical characteristics as the basis for giving the ruling of purity or impurity.

Following the classification of filths, or pollutants, the state of the four environmental elements were considered after being exposed to those pollutants. Our discussion will be limited here to include space and water. Figure 2 shows the status of place or surface hit by a filthy or an impure agent before and after getting dry and whether or not the surface is solid.<sup>15</sup> In general, we realize how the rulings are responding to climatic, physical, and geographical circumstances encompassing the event of polluting a space.

The case is entirely different when it comes to polluting the water due to the multiplicity of forms and circumstances covered by jurists. Those forms

and circumstances can be summarized as follows:

1. The type of water source
2. Water volume
3. The degree of admixture between the pollutant and water.
4. The type of the intruding substance (pure or impure).
5. Water movement (still or running)

Figures 3 and 4, present the different cases for polluting the water. The water was classified into running, still, and well water. Different criteria were then applied in order to rule whether the water is pure or impure. In addition to the five forms above, one can deduce the following biologic and physical criteria from figures 3 and 4.

1. The visibility of the polluting substance.
2. The alteration in the physical properties of water (color, taste, or smell).
3. The location of the polluting agent.
4. The dissemination of the pollutant particles throughout the water as determined by surface disturbance test or the adoption of certain distances.
5. The state of the polluting agent in terms of solidity or liquidity.
6. The state of the polluting creature in terms of life and death.
7. The state of the polluting dead creature in terms of decay.
8. The amount or number of the polluting agent(s).

Here it should be noticed that the rulings given to the water as being pure or impure does not qualify or disqualify the water for ablution for prayers only. The rulings follow suit on the potability of water, thus emphasizing the non-secularity of the Muslim's life.

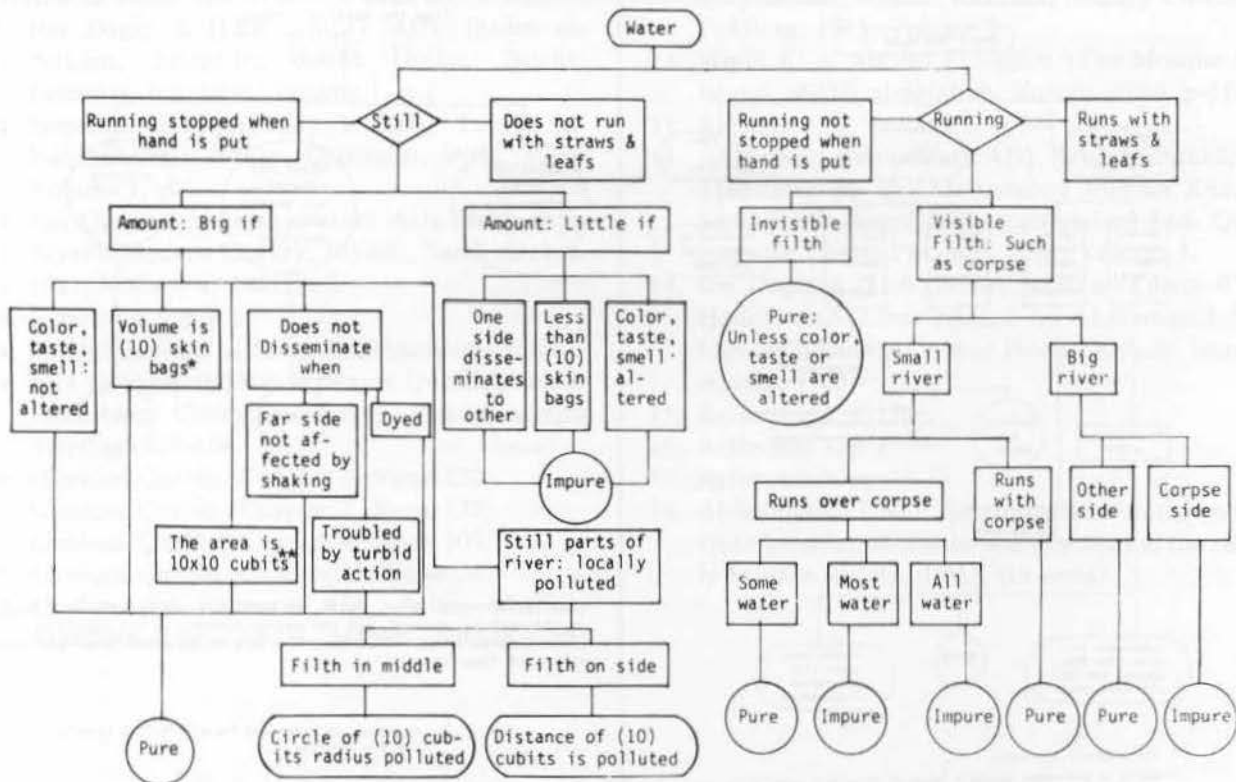
Purifying the polluted or filthy water is shown in figure 5, where the process of purification is based on:

1. Water volume.
2. The alteration of the physical characteristics of water.

Having the purification process taken place, figure 6 indicates the ruling on the water that has separated after being used in washing out the impurity.<sup>16</sup> We notice from the chart and the sketch in figure 6 that the washing water can not separate as a pure water unless the washed element is not dirty any more and the water properties are not changed. For example if the washed element is clean while water properties are affected - as in (c) - the separated water is considered impure.

Finally, figure 7 presents a new perception where some addition to the water may not necessarily be filthy, but may render the water inappropriate for ablution.<sup>17</sup> Therefore the resulting water may be fit for human consumption but not for ablution as in the first part (i.e., vinegar solution or juices).

Figure -3- Still and Running Waters and Rulings of Their Purity When Affected by Impurities



\* Approximately 20 liters.

\*\* A cubit is approximately 70 cm. (2  $\frac{1}{3}$  feet)

Figure -4- Well Water and Rulings of Its Purity When Affected by Impurities

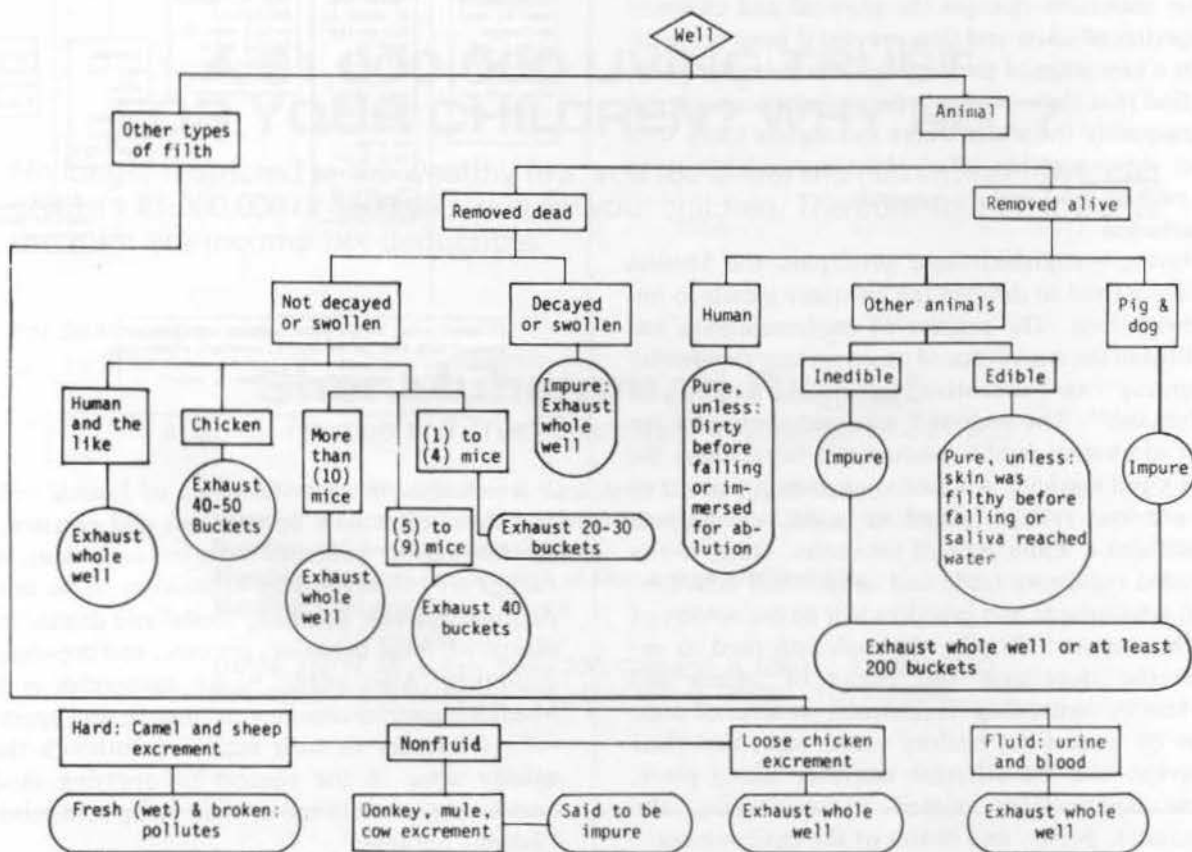
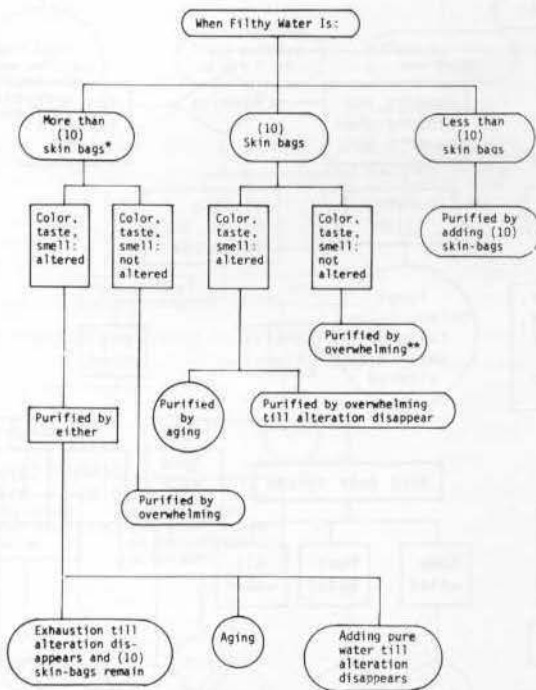




Figure -5- Purifying Filthy Water



\* Approximately 20 liters.

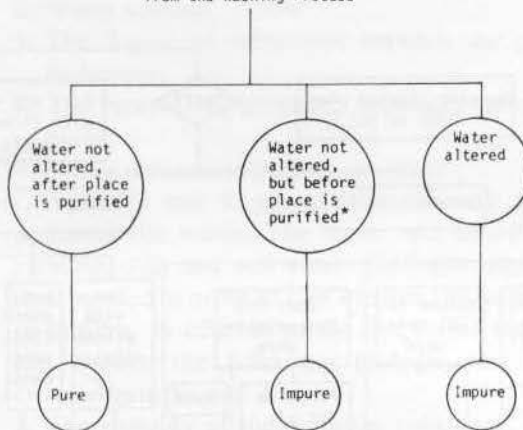
\*\* Adding an additional amount of water to dissolve a potentially unnoticed impurity resulting from water's contact with a polluting agent which has not necessarily altered water's color, taste, or smell.

It is pertinent to point out how a certain degree of materialistic conception was attained by the previous rulings. It was shown how dissolving in or unity with water molecules changes the physical and chemical properties of water and thus prevent it from being used in a new stage of purification. On the other hand, we find that those rulings were practical enough not to disqualify the water where incomplete unity with other substances has taken place unavoidably, as in the case of sand and its minerals.

**Conclusion**

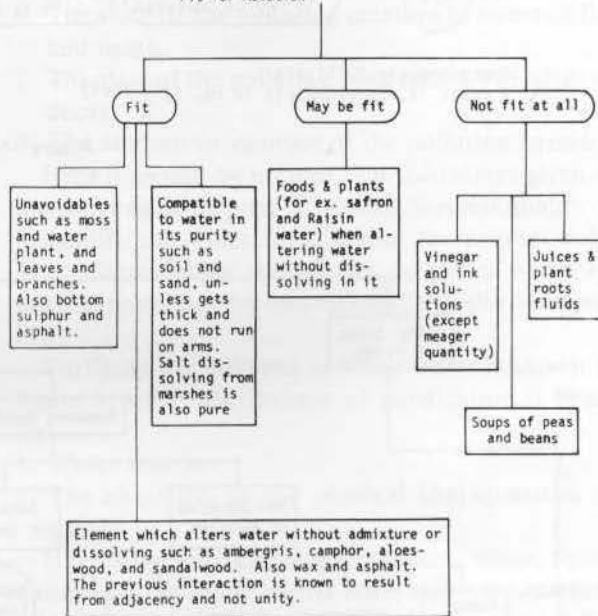
Having established those principles, the Muslim society started to develop the adequate means to implement them. The process of implementation has resulted in the emergence of an important personality assuming an executive position known as "Muhtasib". The muhtasib was empowered by the ruler to observe public conduct and behavior in the streets and markets. Application and enforcement of the previous rulings related to health and hygiene constituted a major part of his duties. Other duties included regulating trade and commercial activities. Such applications and practices will be the subject of another report.<sup>18</sup> Briefly, the muhtasib used to enforce the cleanliness and purity of streets and markets by controlling its contents, patterns of uses, types of users (i.e., healthy versus sick) and their behavior, and the different activities taking place. These applications aimed at preserving the cleanliness, purity, and health of the environment.

Figure -6- The Status of Purity for Water Separating from the Washing Process



That is: water's color, taste, or smell are not altered as a result of the washing process, but the washed element is not completely cleaned or purified. Therefore the separating water takes the same ruling of impurity.

Figure -7- Additives to Water and Their Effect on Water's Fit for Ablution



It is noticeable that the effect of Islamic rulings, and their consequent applications and practices, on "public health" preceded other cultures. Also, those rulings are still applied by Muslims in so far as their personal hygiene, ablution, foods' and drinks' ingredients, personal behavior, pet care, and dressing, are concerned. Also, public health authorities in most Muslim countries continue to observe and apply the rulings relevant to their activities, although this is usually done in the context of applying modern health requirements rather than being recognised as "Islamic heritage".

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