

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

Purity: Guarding the Body Corporate

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Meet the author

Dr. Moyra Dale is an ethnographer who has worked for over two decades in the Middle East. Her research includes adult literacy in Egypt and the women's mosque movement in Syria through women's accounts and understanding of their own lives and realities. She writes and teaches on cross-cultural anthropology and Islam.

Chapter overview

While we can all only meet God where we are, in our bodies, in space and time, women are more aware of our materiality in the everyday reality of our lives and the “earthy messiness of our bodily cycles.” In the Incarnation, God himself was grounded in a body, in a specific time and place. The individual body also functions as a map of the body corporate. Social ordering requires boundaries, and purity is a powerful organizing paradigm in societies around the world, as a way of guarding the corporate body and its values. Causes of defilement include body fluids, immoral behaviour, disease, and death. Ritual and moral defilement find particular embodiment in women in many societies. Communities guard social boundaries through deterrents such as shame, isolating individuals. Control is also enforced through embodied standards of morality or desirability, such as Female Genital Mutilation, or ideal body size. The socially powerless may seek control through their own body, through asceticism, anorexia, or cutting. But when we meet Jesus as God embodied, he redeems our bodies, individual and corporate, as he redefines and inverts social classifications.

General Study Questions

Question 1

What do you think might be specific to your socio-cultural community in how you eat or sleep, or play or pray?

Question 2

What is allowed for bodies (what can be shown? What behaviour is allowed or proscribed?) in your context? How has this been different in other contexts?

Question 3

What behaviour (including sexual) is allowed or unacceptable? Is it the same or different for men and women? How has this changed?

Question 4

What substances make you feel so unclean when you touch them, so that you can't do anything else until you've washed your hands: and even then you still feel somewhat unclean? How do the substances that you've included overlap with some of the categories of ritual defilement listed in the chapter?

Question 5

In what ways has Covid 19 made us put boundaries between us and other people?

Question 6

Have you (or someone you know) ever had a serious ailment? What were the measures for disease control? How did it make you feel about your body?

Question 7

How do you think that your life-experience (including the history and the geography of where you and your community have lived) shapes how you experience God?

Question 8

How did Jesus relate to people who were ritually impure? Who are the people I view as 'impure'? How do I relate to them?

Question 9

What did your baptism mean to you? What happened? Describe it?

Question 10

How might viewing baptism as a purification ritual affect how we view it?

Question 11

Jesus' resurrected body included the scars in his hands, feet and side. What does that mean for our redeemed bodies?

Question 12

How can we introduce God to others in the context of their daily realities, everyday lives and physical circumstances?

Academic Questions

Question 1

How are wholeness and holiness linked?

Question 2

What things constitute barriers between us and God?

Question 3

What things constitute barriers between us and other people(s)?

Question 4

The chapter suggests five categories of defilement (Ritual defilement, Moral depravity, Disfigurement, Disease, Death). Can you think of any others?

Question 5

How does Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection refigure each of the categories of defilement?

Question 6

List some of the forms of body modification that exist in different cultures. How are they used to empower or control?