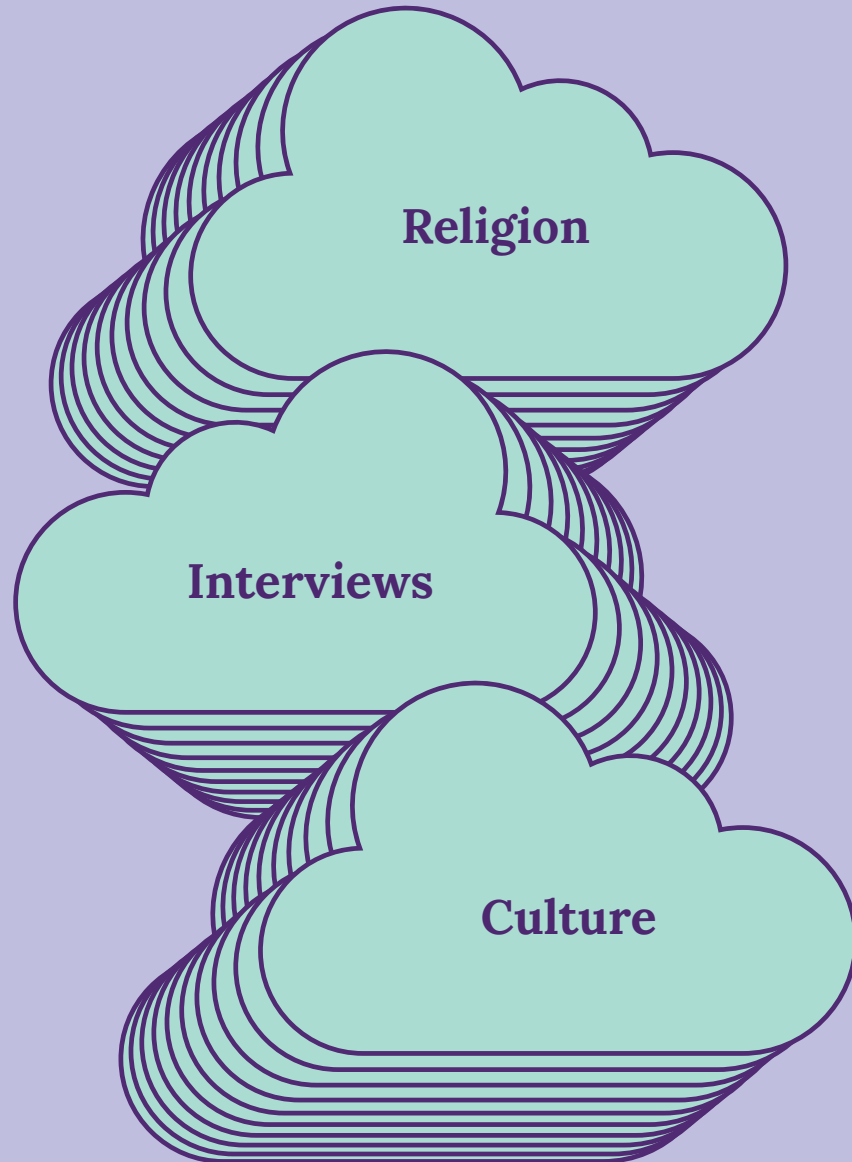


Period and Culture



Religious Leaders and Scholars.

We got the opportunity to interview leaders and scholars from different religions to hear about their views and perspectives around menstruation within specific religions.

We decided to interview religious leaders and scholars as we found that culture and religion are impactful in shaping the way we view things. Our intent was two-fold: to explore how different religions spoke about menstruation and to try and break the shame and stigma through a theological lens.

We reached out to **Rabbi Sybil Sheridan** of West London Synagogue to explain how menstruation is viewed within Judaism. For the Christian perspective, we spoke to **Father Jonathan MacNeaney** from St Mary Abbots Parish Church.

We also got the chance to speak to **Imam Aarij Anwer** of Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque in Toronto and **Dr. Haifaa Younis**, an OBGYN and religious scholar, to speak about menstruation within Islam.

For the Hindu perspective, we spoke with **Avni Chang**, a Hindu studies scholar, **Natasha Chawla**, a practitioner and scholar studying yoga, Vedanta and Hinduism, and **Dr Lidia Wojtczak**, a senior lecturer in Sanskrit and the co-investigator on the BA Sustainable Grant: "Dignity without danger: collaboratively analysing stigma and taboos to develop innovative strategies to address menstrual exclusion in Nepal".

We would like to thank all of the religious leaders and scholars for taking their time to speak with us in an effort to fight the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation.

Disclaimer: all views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the following interviews belong solely to the interviewee and not necessarily reflective of 'From Your Big Sisters'.

Interview with Rabbi Sybil



We sat down with Rabbi Sybil of West London Synagogue to know how menstruation is written within Judaism.

Key terms: Niddah

A family purity law governing the separation of husband and wife during a woman's menstruation. Physical contact between spouses is avoided and they sleep in separate beds while a woman is in Niddah. Some orthodox couples also avoid passing objects directly to each other, seeing each other undress, or engaging in flirtatious conversation.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within the Torah and how is it represented?

It's just very matter of fact. The Torah doesn't seem positive or negative. It's just neutral.

Are there any religious activities that menstruating women are forbidden from doing?

All religious activities remain the same. You pray as normal. Your relationship with God does not change. It is beyond what is happening physically.

← GOOD POINT! - B.

Most people think that when a woman is menstruating, she cannot touch the Torah scroll, the holiest object. Absolute rubbish! The Torah is not defiled by a woman's touch. In fact, the same word used for a woman who is menstruating, is used to define holy objects. The word is **tamei**. Ritual objects are not unclean - they are special, separate, different from ordinary objects. So is a woman during her period.

Regarding words like "separation", "purification" and "unclean", why do you think these words are used to describe menstruation?

These are all descriptions that were made by men, so I think it's got their values imposed on it. There's a lot of different things that go into it - its very hard to know exactly, but I'm going to throw out a few random ideas.

I think the idea of keeping separate [during your period] plus seven days means that, on an average menstrual cycle, you come back to your husband at the height of your fertility. So maybe the system was designed to ensure that women have as many children, as easily as possible. Another one: when you are menstruating and you feel lousy, sometimes you just want to be on your own and not be hugged or cuddled. It doesn't go for everyone, but many have a feeling of "just let me be."

In Ethiopian Jewish communities, they had a separate house in the village for the women to live in during their period. They cooked and chatted together and didn't have to do any work for the family, because there were other people taking care of things.

All these rituals and rules about going to the Mikvah and bathing were not just for women. These rules were for men too. If there was any semen produced, they would also have to separate and go to the Mikvah before they could be with their wives. If you touched the corpse of something, you would

have to ritually immerse. But because for women it occurred so frequently and regularly the rituals surrounding separation and bathing have been understood or interpreted to be mainly for them.

My feeling is that the men probably said “We don't need to” and the women said “But we want to”, because what it does is give them control over their own sexuality. They're the ones who decide when they sleep with husbands. It's not the husbands who decide when they sleep with their wives. So it gave women control, which they didn't have in many other ways of their life because of the way society developed. The women carried on, separated from the husband for the five plus seven days and going to the Mikvah.

What would you say to women who feel impure physically or spiritually during this period?

I would say that this is a very spiritual time actually and a very special time in that this is something unique to women. It is the gift of life and in a sense it's death, because it's evidence of a non-birth, but it confirms the power that you can give life.

We would like to thank Rabbi Sybil for taking the time to speak with us and providing the Jewish perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Imam Aarij



IMAM AARIJ

We sat down with Imam Aarij Anwer of Khalid Bin Al-Walid Mosque, Toronto, to discuss how menstruation is written within Islam.

How is menstruation viewed within Islam?

Menstruation falls under ritual purification which is a big part of Islamic studies. It's discussed strictly in the context of what a person in a situation should or shouldn't do.

What activities are women exempt from during menstruation?

The Prophet, peace be upon him, says menstruation is something God has created for the daughters of Adam. It is part of being a female, not something that should be shamed. It is mentioned in the Quran as *adha*, which means a painful thing. So the acknowledgement is there from both the Quran and from the Prophet that this is a natural process and simply how things are for all women.

Certain responsibilities are removed from a woman; she is not to pray when menstruating. This does not refer to a prayer for help or a prayer to God which is always permissible. Prayer here means ritual prayer that starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, has specific movements, you face the direction of

What activities are women exempt from during menstruation?

The Prophet, peace be upon him, says menstruation is something God has created for the daughters of Adam. God has made a male gender and female gender. This (menstruation) is part of being a female, not something that should be shamed.

It is also mentioned in the Quran as *adha*, which means a painful thing. For the large majority of women, it would be something that is difficult and painful, either physically or emotionally. So the acknowledgement is there from both the Quran and from the Prophet that this is a natural process and simply how things are for all women.

Certain responsibilities are removed from a woman; she is not to pray when menstruating. This does not refer to a prayer for help or a prayer to God which is always permissible. Prayer here means ritual prayer that starts at a certain time, ends at a certain time, has specific movements, you face the direction of Mecca. That ritual prayer, a woman is exempt from. During her period, she is exempt from fasting in the month of Ramadan and is exempt from pilgrimage. These are the three main acts of worship in Islam.

Why do you think women are exempt from these activities apart?

The idea is that it's not a stigma for a woman to be in that situation. It is simply a natural but painful process. It's called the acts of worship. If a man or a woman are not in a state of ritual purity, they are not allowed to pray until they attain ritual purity. If I have used the restroom, I have lost my state of ritual purity. To regain ritual purity, I have to make Wudu (ablution). You wash your face, you wash your hands, up to your arms, etc.

Now, what does ritual purity mean? I keep adding the qualifier ritual because it doesn't imply that a person is impure if they're not in that state. It's just a description of having to be in that

state to pray. It's a strictly religious requirement. The Prophet has said that people of faith are always pure, irrespective of what situation they find themselves to be in. This is strictly a matter of "are you able to perform an act of worship or not?" The same applies to men. You're not allowed to do certain acts of worship until you meet the prerequisites. A woman being on her period puts her in a situation where she's not in ritual purity until she finishes her period. And that's not an indictment of who she is. That's not an indictment of the gender, because this is a natural thing that God has written for the daughters of Adam. Like the Prophet said, it's part of all women and neither is it a slight that this is somehow lesser in any way. If you're not able to fulfill the prerequisite, you don't perform that action.

You keep referring to the daughters of Adam. Do stories refer to Eve as well?

Of course, Eve was considered to be the mother of all the kids of Adam. This is just an expression in Arabic. Like your surname comes from your father. So it's as if the Prophet is referring to all of humanity as one large family and their last name is Adam.

Why do you think it is taboo to speak about menstruation when it is a very natural thing and almost half the world's population experiences it at some point in their life?

I teach at a school and I noticed that when I tell them we'll be studying about menstruation, there's a lot of resistance from the girls saying "No, we don't want to talk about this in front of the boys." I counter that with: you have fathers, brothers, male cousins, so you should know what happens to boys. Likewise, do the boys have mothers, sisters, cousins? Yes, so they should know what is happening to you. This is just how things are.

 **THAT'S A GOOD WAY OF THINKING ABOUT IT... - 5**

But there are sensitivities that people have developed over time culturally, that's probably why it's a taboo. Not because the scripture or the Prophet or the early codifiers of Islamic law made it a taboo. In fact, they spoke about it very openly, very respectfully, and in a very unambiguous way. It became a taboo when perhaps people didn't feel that they had the expertise to speak about it or chose not to speak about it. That's my assumption.

So what would you say to those who shame their daughters or women about their periods in the name of culture or religion?

That's an unacceptable practice. If a culture is shaming women for something that the Prophet has said is a natural thing, something that the Quran says is a natural thing and it's a painful process - meaning that empathy is required here, not shaming - that is unacceptable. A woman on her period is no less or no more than someone who is not on her period. The only difference is there are certain things ritually that she's not doing whereas other things she would do. But as a human being, a person is exactly the same. Their value and their excellence is irrelevant with regards to their natural cycle of menstruation.

Are there any positive interpretations or representations of menstruation within the Quran?

There is an example of the wife of the Prophet, Aisha, who is titled "*the mother of believers*". There are very beautiful descriptions of how the Prophet is lying on her lap while she's on her period and the Prophet is reciting the Quran. She explained to her students that "*the Prophet and I would be very close and loving in our relationship, but the only thing that would not be allowed is the act of intimacy itself*". The Prophet would be just as loving and romantic with her, when she is on her period because a woman is menstruating, doesn't mean that she is any lesser.

Her example is the best example because she is married to the Prophet. She experiences these things on a monthly basis, and she's the one who explained to us how he acted when she was on her period. That tells you that that's the de facto understanding of Islam. If someone brings an interpretation that contradicts that, we say, "Well, that's your opinion. It actually contradicts the way the Prophet acted with his wife." You can find interpretations of menstruation in the Jewish tradition and in the Muslim tradition that would blame the women or somehow degrade the women. Those interpretations that are negative are largely biased and largely people's own opinions. Whereas if you look at scripture and its understanding from the Prophet, it's very clear that this is a natural process.

Are there any other positive stories within Islam about menstruation?

There are quite a few stories where Aisha and the Prophet would often eat from the same plate and drink from the same cup. Maybe today we might find that to be a little gross, but back in the day, that was how you would express your feelings for the other person. So the two would do all that together, irrespective of whether she was on her period.

There would be women who would come and ask her questions on how they should interact with their husbands. Aisha is the one who's liberating their minds by saying, "No, this is how me and the Prophet were." Everything else we did like we would do in other times except actual intercourse. She would share her personal life with the women around her to explain to them this is what Islam is teaching. So I think that's a really empowering narrative that Aisha is the one who pushes the envelope in medieval Arabia about what menstruating women can and can't do.

What would you say to women who feel impure spiritually during their period?

In Islam, if somebody does something mandated by God, then that person is rewarded for that. If they refrain from something prohibited by God, then they're rewarded for that. The fact that you're stopping your ritual acts of worship, in accordance with the commands of God and his Prophet. That is a spiritually uplifting thing you should expect to be rewarded for.

What would you say to women who experience menstrual leakage in a religious setting and feel ashamed about it?

There's an interesting story where there was once a young girl who was traveling with the Prophet and his family. She sat on a camel and had her first period and stained the saddle. She was quite ashamed by that. But when the Prophet heard about it, he said: *"There's nothing to be ashamed of"* and he instructed to wash away the stains and just reuse the same saddle. Don't try to replace it.

If something happens like that, the task is really clear. You just clean it the way any other impurity would be cleaned. It's not that that thing becomes permanently damaged in any way.

Within Islam is there any insertion or hymen taboo before marriage or if the woman is a virgin?

There's no virginity test to verify a person's chastity. That construct isn't found in the texts of Islam. The idea of using a tampon, as long as it doesn't cause her to have medical problems afterwards, it's something that is permissible irrespective of whether the person is married or not.

There was a woman who came to the Prophet and asked *"I have a strong and prolonged flow of blood, what should I do?"* And that's her period.

He instructed her to use cotton to block the bleeding - this is analogous to a tampon, even though the cotton isn't fully

inserted into the hymen. But if women did that back in the day to prevent their blood from gushing, that's an acceptable thing for them to do. It's not a problem as long as it doesn't cause any harm medically to the woman.

Does the hymen itself hold any significance within Islam? And if so, why?

It's a body part, like any body part. In Islam, if a person is unfaithful, man or woman, they're equally sinful. It's not like a woman is more sinful if she is unfaithful to her husband and a man is not. The idea of promiscuity is equally disliked for both genders. So from that perspective, the hymen is irrelevant.

Physically a woman's hymen might be broken in many ways - injury, accident or sports. That doesn't affect them as a person. Likewise, a tampon doesn't make them sinful. It's not like a girl has lost her virginity because they're inserting something there. Islamically there's no precedence to prove someone's virginity.

Do you think Islamically there's a responsibility to teach children about menstruation?

Oh, yes, absolutely it is a responsibility to do so. For example, if you have a book that has 20 chapters of Islamic sciences, this would be chapter number three or four. If you're going to teach an Islamic programme at a school and you have a curriculum, this has to be a component of it. If there's a course being taught about ritual acts of worship, this has to be a component of it because it affects the ritual acts of worship for half the population. There's a course taught on marriage and intimacy between couples. There's a lot of advice and anecdotes and whatnot, but then this is a component in that as well because it affects intimacy of couples, and so on and so forth.

We would like to thank Imam Aarij for taking the time to speak with us about this important topic.

Interview with Dr Lidia



DR LIDIA WOJTCZAK

We sat down with Dr Lidia Wojtczak, a senior lecturer in Sanskrit and co-investigator on the BA Sustainable Grant: "Dignity Without Danger" to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

In your opinion, do you think that menstrual exclusion is mostly rooted in culture and religion?

Hinduism can be seen as both a religion and a way of life and many of the 'religious' rules actually come from books of law - Dharmaśāstras. I'm using the term "Sanskrit Text" as shorthand for texts written in Sanskrit which belong to the normative or orthodox traditions. If we read these texts from the point of view of exclusion, we can see that there are at least three main ways in which women are "put in their place."

The first factor is the impurity of a menstruating woman. Through her impurity, she is able to put all the man's and the village's hard work at risk and completely ruin that whole situation for everyone. She is seen as impure and she knows she's impure. That's very important. She knows it's her responsibility to not pollute. That's her duty as an impure menstruating woman.

In the case of menstrual exclusion in Nepal, impurity is what takes the forefront. In some extreme cases, women can be excluded to these so-called cow sheds and this can lead to very tragic circumstances where women might get very ill or sometimes even die from things like snakebites or smoke or the cold or all these things

You've done research on menstrual exclusion in Nepal in particular - do you know, or have you observed any positive cultural experiences of menstruation in Nepal?

Menstrual exclusion is a very complicated social phenomenon so there are bound to be different perspectives on it. It can be seen as something positive by the women experiencing it. Because of the restrictions they are under, perhaps they don't have to cook for two days, or do any of the cleaning or touching anything at home. This may be the attitude if they have a safer space to be isolated in, safer than a shed in the forest, like a special apartment in their house. Periods are often referred to as 'a woman's holiday' in some places in India. So, while the foundations of the practice are inherently oppressive, women experience it in different ways and, for the most part, they'll try to make the best of it when they can. Another important note is that not all women are forced or choose to isolate when menstruating. Many modern South Asian women are going about their daily lives normally when they menstruate.

What do you feel are the most effective ways to break the shame and stigma of menstruation?

The thing is that they are in a specific context and it's impossible and immoral to take that away from them. Very often you'll see that the girls themselves enforce all of these practices of exclusion and that's because they feel responsible in so many different ways for so many things. It's quite hard to try to force a change from the outside without that context in mind.

I would say education is perhaps the best way to approach the problem of the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation in many places in the world. I do think that many girls don't know what menstruation is.

Menstrual exclusion takes place for a whole range of complicated religious or cultural or historical or social reasons - actually because of a mixture of them all. So a good idea is to make sure girls are receiving the correct information about what is happening with their bodies so that they can choose to make their own decisions insofar as they are able.

How would you say menstruation is written about within Sanskrit or within Hinduism?

It's a big topic. Very generally, you could say it has its foundations in the Vedic texts and these are around 4,000 years old. There's one specific story where one of the greatest Gods, Indra, kills a brahmin, a rival sacrificer, and becomes impure. Therefore he can't do any sacrifices himself and decides to get rid of his impurity by dividing it into thirds. He gives a third to some trees, a third to the earth and he leaves a third to the women. The women say 'sure, we will take on this one-third of your impurity and in return, we want to be able to have children'. And he said, 'fine you'll take the sin and be able to have children whenever you want but the burden you will have from now on is that you will menstruate every month'. Every time this myth gets retold in the texts over the centuries a little bit more is added.

Menstruation gets written about a lot within Hinduism medical literature for the purpose of just describing what it is, 'Why does it happen? Where does it come from?' It's very clear these medical texts, written by men, didn't know exactly how a woman's body works.

Tantric texts are texts which were written to be subversive and as a sort of a counterculture. Another thing that tantric practitioners may appreciate is menstruation as a sign of the 'shakti' or the power of a female goddess. But it's not necessarily true for every branch.

There is a temple called Kamakhya in Assam, where it's thought that that is where the goddess' vulva resides, and so that's where she menstruates. Practitioners might go and worship the menstruation of the goddess, but then at home, they may still practice menstrual exclusion for social reasons because the women of the family may still be seen as impure when they menstruate. However, if you are interested in finding textual references to more positive outlooks on menstruation, I would say the Tantric texts are where you might find them.

Within Hinduism, are there any activities that women are exempt or forbidden from during menstruation?

Within the texts and the prescriptions of broadly understood Hinduism, the most important thing is that a woman just cannot be around a man. She cannot look at him. She cannot be looked at by him. She cannot touch anything that is generally used in the house. She cannot cook. But there are all sorts of ancient prohibitions, which don't make much sense anymore, but which people may still follow. In Nepal, a woman may decide that she can't touch a jar of pickles when she's menstruating, because they will go off rather than pickle. The normative Sanskrit texts tell women they can't cut their nails or hairs. They shouldn't be doing their makeup. They shouldn't be making ropes, for some reason. That's a very ancient prohibition that must have originally had some relevance. You can't specifically use eyeliner, can't use body creams, etc. Personal hygiene is just generally not seen as something that should be happening.

Do you find it interesting that menstruation is considered impure but then women are forbidden from personal hygiene?

The point is that this is a very different type of impurity. Beside the basic, physical impurity, there exists a social and ritual impurity and the things you endanger with this second type of impurity are much more consequential. For instance, the chances of someone else reaching liberation or the ritual failing. It's not impurity in the sense of physical impurity, but just being a danger to society.

Within a Sanskrit text, apart from how menstruation is viewed, how is menstrual blood specifically represented?

Within Orthodox Hinduism, I would say that menstrual blood is the symbol of this impurity - it's taboo, impure, bad. In general, all bodily fluids are seen as impure. If you think about tantric texts, menstrual blood is one of the respected bodily fluids, because it is something that the goddess also has since she menstruates.

From what I've seen, I'm pretty certain that menstrual blood itself isn't that talked about in Orthodox Hindu settings. It's talked about a lot in medical texts because of this idea that it's a female fluid that is the counterpart of semen. There is a lot of discussion on how the female 'semen' works and on its relation to menstrual blood. Is it the menstrual blood which is the semen itself? Is there a secret feminine semen just hidden inside the menstrual blood? Or even is it something separate to menstrual blood, which is a female semen. There's no taboo there because it's just the medical text.

Why do you think menstruation is a taboo topic when almost half the population experience it at some point in their life?

I'll speak only again to Hindu normative texts. It's very clear from a Hindu perspective that the texts were masculine, male-oriented, very patriarchal. If you think about the caste system (there are four castes in the system) that's always

related to men. Women are very often classed together with the lowest of castes. Of course we can't actually verify how all of these prescriptions and prohibitions affected women throughout history, but as far as we can tell from the texts that were being produced, this was a male-centred culture that was writing male-centred texts and creating male-centred prescriptions and propositions.

What would you say to those that shame their daughters or women, about periods in the name of religion? Or are there any religious texts that speak against it?

For the most part, menstrual shaming and menstrual exclusion happens for more complicated reasons than we can understand looking from the outside. While I'm very compassionate and very empathetic towards anyone who's going through something like menstrual shaming, I wouldn't want to create even more difficult situations for women, for instance, by turning them against their families. That just seems to be counterproductive. I think that every case will need to be treated separately and with a very deep knowledge of the cultural, religious, and social context that's taking place and which is leading to this exclusion and shaming.

To answer the second part, no. I have yet to come across a text which would speak against menstrual exclusion (period shaming does not seem to be a concern, perhaps because men do not have much of a role to play in it?). I would imagine that in those texts which venerate menstruation, we'll find an ultra transgressive, ultra-feminine female power goddess narrative. I doubt they would have anything to say about the real-life experiences of women who go through menstrual exclusion or shaming.

Does the hymen hold any significance within Hinduism?

I don't know. Good question. The hymen more in the sense of virginity, for instance? I don't think it's written about at all as a piece of female anatomy, like 'the hymen exists'. I don't even think I've seen that come up.

Do you know why it isn't mentioned? Maybe they didn't know about it.

Exactly. That's the thing, to know what a hymen is, you'd have to observe the female body with pretty strong interest. At least Indian texts that I've read, it's not that they are not mentioned because they are too taboo to mention, it's just that they weren't of any interest to the people writing the texts. It feels like two sides of the same coin - since the authors don't seem to know much about menstruation, they've not studied it themselves - as something 'unknown' and 'mysterious', it's easy to be afraid of. That's the sort of feeling you get in these Sanskrit normative texts - menstruation is such a mysterious thing, it's completely unknown and unstudied and dangerous and, importantly, men don't have it. There is a feeling even in the oldest myth about the god Indra, that there must be something inherently wrong with women or something magical or weird.

You can also sometimes get the impression when reading these normative Sanskrit texts that women menstruating [are] very powerful. They are a danger and should be locked away because they have this destructive power.

It must be a huge power because sometimes there seems to be this undercurrent that all of these mechanisms - women's natural 'wicked nature', women's dharma and the impurity of menstruation are all tools in a complicated system of controlling this power.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Hinduism or Sanskrit?

I think there is a responsibility to teach children everywhere, about menstruation. In an ideal world, boys and girls are taught about menstruation. I think that one of the biggest things that's still missing from the discussion in the West, for instance, is the fact that despite a more advanced sexual education in schools, boys still don't always realise how menstruation and the menstrual cycle work. It would be brilliant if that could change everywhere, within whatever context.

We would like to thank Dr Lidia Wojtczak for her time and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Father Jonathan



We sat down with Rev.d. Jonathan MacNeaney of St Mary Abbots Church to speak about how menstruation is written within Christianity.

Within Christianity, how is menstruation written about?

There's very little in the New Testament texts, but it's been a non-issue in the Christian Church throughout history. There's some debate in the early Church Fathers (ancient religious Christian theologians), because there's lots in the Old Testament about menstruation, but Christians don't tend to abide by most of the purity laws, so there's some debate in the early Church in the first 500 years about whether we should continue with the purity laws that are about menstruation. And the answer is no.

But it is retained in Orthodox Christianity - Greek, Russian, and Coptic Orthodox Christians, don't allow women to receive communion when they're menstruating. So through their tradition, it's been kept alive. But for the churches of the West, it's just a non-issue. That's the official church line. Although in many places it's kept alive through folk religion and through the received culture. These deeply ingrained patterns of cultural living often live alongside Christian faith.

They often hold stigma and taboo around menstruation in a way that the official teaching of the Church doesn't.

Is menstrual blood viewed as unclean within Christianity?

In the Hebrew Scriptures blood is seen as the real unclean thing - but it is blood from anywhere and everywhere. So the worst kind of food law you can break is the drinking of animal blood, as it's seen as being sacred, divine and where the life force of things comes from. It is both the most pure and holy thing because it's what gives birth to life, but it's also the most impure thing to spill, to be covered with or to ingest. Menstrual blood is not seen as different from any other blood. And nor are there any rules about cleaning yourself of it or washing or regaining holiness.

Why do you feel that menstrual blood is seen differently within the Old Testament?

It's to do with its life giving properties. The understanding of reproduction in the first century are quite an agrarian one. Women were seen as fertile fields in which little humans were sown. That's why there are all these rules about masturbation. There's a character called Onan, an Old English word for "masturbating" (hence the sin of Onan), and he spills his 'seed' upon the ground. This is seen as a bad thing to do because rather than making use of it for its proper purpose of creating humans, he has wasted this gift. I guess that's the reason menstrual blood is seen as being sacred because it is a place for the birth of new life. As it's sacred in that way, it also falls on the other side of being particularly polluting when it's not being fertilised.

Why do you think that menstruation is seen as a taboo topic to speak about when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

It doesn't carry taboo within Christianity, but it probably does within the cultures in which Christianity exists. My

perspective is that the holiness code is an attempt to live in healthy ways. People may have recognised that those who spend a lot of time touching blood, tending to the wounded or people with leprosy, got leprosy themselves. So if you wanted to protect your community from disease, one way of doing that was to keep all of the diseased people away from you. So I suppose it's probably a correlation and incorrect assumption that because sometimes touching blood leads to bad consequences, then always touching blood is going to lead to that consequence.

What would you say to those who shame their daughters and women about their periods and the name of culture and religion?

"Stop it!" It would be hurtful, to me as a Christian, for other people to be justifying that kind of shaming in the name of Christ. Shame is believing that there's something wrong with you. Guilt is believing that you've done something wrong. In that, shame is a much more insidious issue than guilt, because guilt you can be forgiven for.

It says that you, who are God's beloved creatures, have not only done something wrong but that you are something wrong, and that's not right.

Those who do shame others probably don't know the significance of the damage they are doing in terms of hours of lost schooling and education, lost earnings, etc. due to menstruation. I suppose that upon learning that, they might feel quite ashamed about what they've been doing. So I guess I'm calling them to repentance, to seek forgiveness for this thing (shaming) that they've been doing wrong and to amend their lives.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within the Bible that are represented in a positive way?

No, but I would suspect that in folk religion and the times that Christ lived in, rejoiced and held ritual acts of transition from personhood surrounding menstruation. But it doesn't appear as narratives in the scriptures themselves. Given that there was so much positivity about pregnancy and the bringing forth of children, and given that menstruation is required to recognise the "way of women", then presumably there was also joy around menstruation because it is indicative of the fact that this person could have children.

What do you think about the fact that half the population experience menstruation, that on average it lasts about eight years of a woman's life, and yet there isn't much writing about it within the Bible?

I don't find it massively surprising because all of these are scriptures were written by men who have kept themselves away from women. So Paul is writing most of the New Testament letters – he's single and doesn't have a wife. Throughout Christian history, the people who are literate are often monks and holy men and often on their own, so it's not surprising that they're not writing about women and particularly about things that women were keeping or forced to keep hidden from them.

What would you say to women who feel impure spiritually during their period?

For Christians, I would say that there is no reason for them to think that they are physically or spiritually impure within the Christian tradition. This is a part of who they are, created lovingly as a creature of God. They are welcome to take full part in acts of Christian worship and in communal life.

When I'm in church preaching to people in their eighties and nineties, I think of the person who was preaching to them when they were children telling them "Do not allow women to speak in church, menstruation is impure, etc., which is the exact opposite of what I'm saying to them now, and I realised that it's unreasonable for me to think that they are suddenly going to change. They're in that difficult position of hearing both of those contradictory voices and trying to decide whom to follow. If they decide 'I'll do what Jonathan says', then a part of them is feeling like they're betraying what they were told as a child. They're trying to be faithful to what was passed on to them and the swing side of that is the cost that it continues to have. We have to find a path between those two things.

There's a significant amount of sensitivity that we have to around telling people what they ought to think about menstruation, just like other issues, even when it feels so clear-cut to us, especially as a white Western man, I suppose.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings?

Being embarrassed about something like that is fine, just in the same way that if any other bodily function that I normally keep private, but not secret, was suddenly made public. If I let out a massive fart as I was in front of the altar, I might feel embarrassed, but I wouldn't feel ashamed as if "gosh, there's something wrong with me". [M]enstruation is part of what bodies do. So I would hope that they wouldn't feel ashamed that there was something wrong with them, but hope that they could laugh off the potential embarrassment of it.

Does the hymen hold any significance within Christianity and if so, why?

Nope, not in the scriptures, not in the history of the Church. So what holds significance is virginity. The rules of the church are still that "sexual relationships are exclusively for marriage",

but very few people in this nation are still practising that. Again, I'm sure they'd be part of the cultures and the folk religion in nations where Christianity exists, but never at the behest of the Church.

Within Christianity, is there any insertion or hymen taboo before marriage or if the woman is a virgin?

No, but I can completely imagine that there are Christians and even Christian leaders who would say that within cultures and contexts. The responsibility there, in the Church, [is] to do some work of demythologisation, which it hasn't done. Either way, I would imagine that it is to do with men wanting control over women's bodies.

Do you feel it's your role to educate others when it comes to subjects such as menstruation?

So yes, the Church does a lot of educating of children by way of its schools, about sex education, but it's just such a non-issue for most of the people in my churches. It's not something I've preached about, I've talked about other related issues like female genital mutilation in public service. So I haven't spoken about it explicitly, but there would be no reason not to.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Christianity?

There's not a scriptural warrant to do it but obviously we want our children to be well adjusted, happy, healthy adults, and want them to know about issues of justice. There is responsibility to talk about any issues of justice and to teach our kids about it.

We would like to thank Father Jonathan for speaking with us and providing the Christian perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Natasha Chawla



NATASHA CHAWLA

We sat down with Natasha Chawla, a practitioner and scholar studying yoga, Vedanta and Hinduism, to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

What does Hinduism say about menstruation?

Hinduism has two categories of scriptures. *Shruti* is the eternal and unchanging knowledge revealed to great seers in their meditation since the inception of Time. *Smṛti* is man's societal customs and traditions of any given time.

In parts of rural India, it is a celebration when a girl first gets her period, as it is considered her passage into womanhood. Fertility is considered as a blessing, a chance to help bring life on earth.

Throughout India's many regions, there were/are varying restrictions followed for girls/ladies during their menstruation period, but the premise is the same: It is a time of detoxification, when the body is ridding itself of toxins. Th[e] restrictions [vary] from not entering the kitchen, to not visiting a temple, to not serving guests. For the sake of "maintaining purity," some customs are observed above reason and science simply because they are traditions of yore.

To say that menstruation is impure implies that the baby she delivers is also impure. Such statements are born of ignorance and not stated in Hindu scriptures, but nevertheless were often accepted by illiterates who succumbed to and promoted superstitions or traditions that carried on over time as a result of power plays for control.

In Hindu scriptures, the restrictions given seem to coincide more with logical reasoning, such as the need to stay indoors, revive energy, and maintain hygiene in a time when sanitary products had not been developed. For example, wild animals could attack at the smell of blood, so it was safer for women to remain indoors.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from doing during menstruation?

In Hinduism it is suggested to abstain from sex when menstruating due to hygienic reasons. It is also suggested not to cook for others because your vibrations go into your food. It is well known that while cooking, it is important for a homemaker to have positive thoughts because thoughts, too, have energy, and energy affects everything. During menstruation, hormones are at play and can lead to wandering thoughts, or emotional swings, or a restless mind. These don't spell balance, and such energy transfers into the food you cook for others.

It was said in much earlier days not to sleep in the same room or the same bed during menstruation, but this was also said because of hygienic reasons, and in a time when sanitary products had not yet been developed.

In Hinduism, how is menstruation viewed?

Menstruation is viewed as natural and part of the female cycle, not as clean or dirty. There is a concept of impurity in rituals

because the body is unhygienic and the mind is susceptible. But whether menstruating or not, hormones at play can lead to a mind becoming agitated or imbalanced. To do any worship ritual properly, the mind should be calm, balanced, and focused. The word *shucha* in Sanskrit means clean. It does not always imply purity. It is not that menstruating women are bad or impure. It is a matter of practicality and hygiene. Back in the day, to go to a place of worship, whether temple or mosque, without sanitary napkins was partly because it was unhygienic. To maintain the sanctity and purity of a holy place of pilgrimage, such as a temple, any negative vibrations of anyone, due to menstruation or not, should be checked at the door.

Hinduism, which reveres all natural forces and worships nature as the expression of Divine Mother of the cosmos, does not aim to suppress women. Over time, a lack of right thinking and understanding of Hindu scriptures have created countless taboos and stigmas. These have brought their own dangers, including society deeming natural phenomena like menstruation as dirty or impure.

Why do you think menstruation is seen as a taboo topic when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

While most written Hindu scriptures and commentaries have been written by men, it is not that women are told not to discuss such matters or that their experiences are taboo and not for social discussion. Different cultures of countries, even in regions within countries, determine their own levels of conservatism, extreme or liberal, scientific or spiritual or superstitious, per their norms, customs, and traditions. In Hinduism, this is why *smṛti-shāstra* (scriptures that adapt with the changing times per the values and needs of society) is important.

The driving force behind Hinduism is always *dharma*: for humanity to adopt right thinking and action that results in the highest welfare of all. For this, discussions will be needed at the right time, but if this does not happen, the respective affected sect of society will force it to happen because of its need. Matters stigmatised or labelled as taboo based on age-old traditions cannot, and should not, be buried or ignored for the sake of convenience. In Hinduism, *dharma* is key and awareness or alertness is its thought-provoking instigator.

What practices regarding menstruation do you feel are not prescribed by religion, but come from cultural pressures?

I don't think Hinduism prescribes impractical rules and regulations for women. I think cultural pressures do have strong influences on the masses and on people who choose to remain unaware or overly conservative for the sake of blind tradition. One cultural stigma about menstruation that continues is the insistence for women not to leave the house when menstruating, or not to enter the kitchen. Times have changed and women are part of the work-force to support their families.

Hinduism's scriptures focus on *dharma*, or righteousness, in societal living, to think and do what is *dharmaic*, which necessarily means what is the best way to proceed to benefit all.

I think many cultural stigmas have been stamped as the insistences of religion when they are not so. And I think awareness and knowledge are key in helping create a more harmonious and *dharmaic* society.

What would you say to those who shame women about their periods in the name of culture or religion?

I think men wrongly shame women as a result of their own agitations, negativities, and weaknesses. It is a cultural defect born of ignorance, and ignorance can only be removed by knowledge.

After all, how can a woman be blamed or eschewed because of a natural occurrence in her body? If you haven't experienced something, it's easy to shame it. It is more heart-breaking to hear of women shaming other women—they should know better.

Are there any interpretations of menstruation within religious scriptures that are represented in a positive or natural way? Are there any positive stories?

I read in a book on shāktas, or worshippers of Divine Mother, and practitioners of tantra yoga that they consider menstruation as something very sacred.

The Devipuram Temple in Andhra Pradesh is dedicated to Devi worship and the temple's presiding deity is Goddess Lalita. In the temple, every woman is looked upon as the living Goddess. It is believed there that a woman's entry into the temple results in the transmission of energy from the temple deity to her, even more so during a woman's period. Far from considering it impure, menstruation is considered just the opposite—sacred.

In Hinduism, all forms of Devi (Goddess Parvati, Durga, Kali, Chandi, etc.) are, in various ways, related to fertility and/or blood. There are many temples like this that follow the cycle of the Goddess. Respecting a woman's cycle, the temple is closed for three days a month for the living Goddess deity in the temple to rest. When the temple reopens, there is a celebration and devotees flock there.

What would you say to a woman who feels impure, physically or spiritually, during her period?

I would say, 'Educate yourself and study the scriptures you follow, because naturally occurring hormonal changes are not an indication of impurity.' If girls are taught properly on the who-what-why-when etc. of menstruation, I do not think they would feel this way. The taboo and secrecy around this natural phenomenon needs to be properly explained.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in a religious setting?

Clearly, it is nothing to be ashamed about. It may be embarrassing, but it is not an offence against God or humanity. It happens.

Is the topic of menstruation spoken about on a public level within Hinduism?

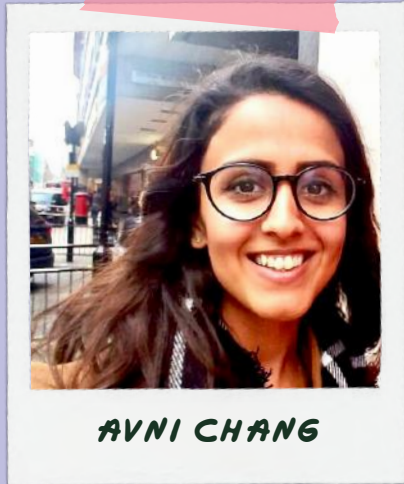
Culturally, it is discussed and explained in private not public, woman to girl, not man to girl. In [the] modern day, educated Hindus do not hesitate to mention such topics in public. There are NGOs and social service programmes that serve India's villages and rural areas, and help create awareness among village women about menstruation, sanitary napkins, hygiene, disposal, fertility, contraception, and similar topics.

Do you think there is a responsibility to teach children about menstruation within Hinduism?

More than searching for statements in Hindu scriptures, children learn science first. Menstruation is a regular, natural, scientific occurrence. It has to be introduced and taught at home or in school. This is the 21st century and I think there is a greater relevance and prevalence of these conversations today.

We would like to thank Natasha Chawla for speaking with us and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Avni Chang



We sat down with Avni Chang, a Hindu studies scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Hinduism.

How is menstruation written about within Hinduism?

When it comes to Hinduism, there's so much diversity so I cannot speak for every single tradition and belief. There is no blanket 'Hindu' view, teaching or tradition. Many Hindus believe one of two things: that a menstruating woman is either so pure that she takes on the form of a living goddess during her time of the month and can redirect the energy of an idol in a temple, or that the menstruating woman is impure and her body is undergoing a period of drastic change and detoxification. Attitudes surrounding menstruation in general have less to do with a single, time-honoured religious principle and more to do with a kind of 'handed-down' tradition that their families or close circles are keepers of. In this view and in practice taboo ideas around menstruation are more cultural than they are religious. This is why you will find rules or prescriptions in dharma texts – texts that lay out rules and duties that tend to paint more of a picture of the time in which they were written – a time that had different technologies of self-sanitation, health, etc. Today, things are different.

If girls choose to follow traditions from their mothers or grandmothers it's a matter of personal choice.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from during menstruation?

The way that menstruation is talked about is so diverse. One idea around it is self-purification (tapas) for the woman – something that only a woman has the privilege of experiencing and therefore she doesn't need to partake in devotional rites. A lot of that is based on the different states and energies of the mind. When she's experiencing this kind of self-purification, she is kind of resetting her physical and mental wellbeing. The Manu Smṛti, one of the oldest well-known texts on dharma, specifically states that the woman whose thoughts have become impure would be purified by menstruation (5.108). In order for the woman to undergo self-purification she is 'restricted' or does not need to do certain day-to-day activities. This might be typically viewed as segregation. However, the Hindu texts say something else – the idea of menstruation is an act of tapas, which when performed by anyone (male or female), is performed in solitude.

Perhaps this is why when I would go to India, people would tell me 'Oh, you're on raja (holiday).' I would be exempt from having to do anything.

What are some examples of restrictions within the Hindu texts?

Depending on what view we consider – whether menstruation is a period of impurity due to a rise in a certain mental energy, or whether menstruation is a period of austerity, or self-purification – the restrictions and prescriptions (some more positive than 'oppressive') are different. For example, certain dharma texts ask the menstruating woman not to perform any sacred (religious) activities like morning rituals, large scale rituals, visiting temples, etc. Others ask women not to cook food as her mental energies will be transferred into the food.

Others even go to specifically restrict women from touching certain metals due to how her energies may react when coming into contact with these metals. On the other side of the coin, certain dharma texts also ask the menstruating woman to rest and not physically exert themselves. When we read such texts we may see the prescriptions given to women as 'oppressive', but these are no different to the prescriptions given to people who have just experienced a death in the family or given birth, etc. The idea is that you shouldn't be involved in religious rituals as they expect you to be calm and collected when you perform them.

Can women pray the same way during their period?

A hundred years ago, the narrative would be different, but now if you go to certain temples, there are sanitary bins and tampon [vending] machines which makes it quite obvious that everyone's welcome.

How is menstruation viewed? And how is menstrual blood viewed specifically?

I would say it's seen as natural in some cases it is considered pure and sacred, and even plays an important role in Tantric rites and rituals.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings or when praying in a temple?

I think we would all be embarrassed if something like that happened to us. I don't think the embarrassment would have anything to do with religious thinking or settings specifically.

Why do you think menstruation is seen as a taboo topic to speak about when almost half the population will experience it at some point in their life?

I think it's based on tradition. We're being brought up in a household in which these things have been practised for so long and you will ask questions as to why, and won't get

answers until you start exploring for yourself.

It's the way it's always been, isn't it? I don't think it's a specific religious or cultural issue. I think it's a worldwide issue.

Can you speak more about the traditions in Hindu culture when a girl does start her period.

Like in many other religions/faiths, it is a matter of personal choice. The guidance is for them to rest for the first three days of the menstruation to allow that much needed rest from their physical chores and it was also hoped that at this delicate time the menstruating girl would get the co-operation of her family.

Speaking specifically, in certain parts of India, young girls who have just started menstruating are dressed up, adorned, gifted and fed and the idea is that the goddess is now coming into her form. The celebration is also tied to self-purification - only the woman is able to go through this monthly detoxification because she's more eternally pure. What men may have to put special effort into comes as part of a natural process to women.

In other parts of India certain cultures hold mass festivals and celebrations. Other ideas revolve round 'loss of life'. When someone dies the family goes through a period of grievance. It is a period in which they find a way to cope with their loss. If menstruation is viewed in this same light the unfertilised egg may be equated to the prevented birth of a soul. The woman's body naturally takes time to grieve this loss.

These are only some beliefs and associated views. There is not one specific blanket Hindu worldview.

Given that menstruation is such a big part of a girl's and woman's life, are there any interpretations of menstruation within Hindu scriptures?

Not that I know of. But we are translating Sanskrit into English, so you have terms like 'coming of age' or 'she's now a woman' that might get lost in translation.

Do you think cultural views about menstruation are changing in different countries?

I think it is in places that have access to information and knowledge.

Do you think it's problematic that blood, hymen, menstruation and sex are not addressed?

It really depends on where the responsibility lies. As a parent, I think that the times and thinking are changing, that people are talking more. I would hope that when my daughter grows up, she's going to come to me to talk about things that I wouldn't necessarily have felt comfortable talking about openly when I was growing up. I think it's a responsibility of individuals to feel comfortable to receive that information and we'll be able to talk about it more.

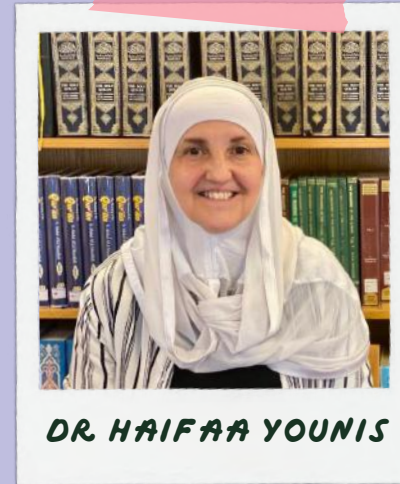
Can it be problematic? Yes. If people aren't informed, but everyone has their own opinion, it's like vaccinations.

Having the internet to use isn't always the best thing, but I guess calculated decisions and good informed choices are important.

I can see that there are consequences of not addressing it, but again, that depends on the parent - a lot of the stigma depends on what the parent chooses to teach or inform the child.

We would like to thank Avni Chag for her time and providing the Hindu perspective within this important discussion.

Interview with Dr Haifaa



We sat down with Dr. Haifaa Younis, an OBGYN and religious scholar, to speak about how menstruation is written within Islam.

Is there anything that your Islamic study has helped you understand better about being an OBGYN and gynecology? Everything. You start practicing differently, start looking at your patients differently, how you treat diseases and your expectation from treatment - The more you study Islam the more compassionate you are.

How is menstruation written about within Islam?

Amazingly, it's in the religious book and is mentioned in the second chapter, Surah Bukrah, in the Quran. The Prophet's (pbuh) companions ask him, 'what is this menstruation?' The word menstruation in Arabic is "adha" which is pain, discomfort, it's something they don't like. So absolutely, it is mentioned in the Quran and in the Sunnah [the way or the path of the Prophet (pbuh)] too.

What activities are women exempt or forbidden from during thier period?

So the first thing is, they should not pray or fast during their period. If they are menstruating during the time of Hajj (pilgrimage) they can do everything except 'tawaf', which is when you circumambulate the Kaaba. She is not allowed to touch the Quran, unless she wears a glove, or (there is) a barrier. To read the Quran, there are some exceptions like if she's memorising the Quran and is worried she might forget. Or if she is a teacher and she has to teach. And then in private life, intimate relations with the husband is absolutely not allowed.

How does menstruation come into play with being a religious scholar? How do you overcome these restrictions and in these moments of abstaining from being religious?

The beauty of Islam is, the act of worship in Islam is not linear and if I cannot do this in a certain way, that means I'm less, or I am disconnected. No, the acts of worship of Islam are external and internal (in the heart). There is a long list of things I can say, read or do and I'm still connected [to Allah]. It's just that the action [praying], I am not allowed to do. So the connection with Allah, it doesn't stop during the menstruation. The way we connect changes.

What would you say to women who feel impure physically and spiritually during their period?

I don't use the word impure because there's a hadith (story) of the Prophet where he says "*The believer is never impure*". So I always use the term 'in a state of menstruation'. You need to change the mindset that 'I am impure, that I am different, No, I am not.'

In arabic, the word used is 'Tahāra'. I don't think there's a better way to translate it other than 'impure'. But the implications of 'impure' in English are very different than the

word in Arabic. That's where the confusion comes in. You are always pure. You are Islamically in a state of impurity because you cannot pray and you can not fast. That's it. But you are pure.

What would you say to women who feel ashamed of menstrual leakage in religious settings (holidays, when praying, in a mosque...)?

I would say to them "*Allah decrees and whatever Allah decrees will happen*". Secondly, it is the same as if someone leaked urine - they have a full bladder, there isn't a bathroom close by. What do you say? Okay! It's not a big thing. But it is uncomfortable because you feel something coming out. So I would say, don't look down on yourself, you've taken precautions but these things happen. I would go and change, take it easy, and in the future, take more precautions - that's it.

Do you think Islamically there's a responsibility to teach children about menstruation?

Something I would say to all my beautiful Muslim sisters is that this [menstrual education] is something that they have to learn and they [children] need to learn. Every Muslim woman and girl, mother and daughter needs to learn this subject because it is related to your relationship as a believer with your creator. Some scholars will teach you this is a compulsory knowledge of every woman. Even after menopause, a woman needs to know because if she's 57 or 58 and she sees blood, what is this blood? Is this menstruation or not? Can she pray or fast during Ramadan? Can she and her husband have intercourse? So this is a subject that every Muslim woman needs to learn because it's involved in every step of her life and her relationship with her creator.

Would you say the interpretations of menstruation within the Quran are positive or neutral?

I'm speaking as a physician now – when a woman comes to me and says "I have severe pain in my period, I can't go to work. I feel nauseous. I am emotional. To me, anything makes me cry. Anything makes me tense."

My answer is "That's how it is. That's what Allah said it's like in the Quran!" The way I look at it, anything written in the Quran, is something I need to learn about – you shouldn't hide it.

Secondly, Allah has written it in its exact way - menstruation is something that can bring discomfort and pain. It is very sympathetic to the woman. Allah is saying give her space - this can be the time of the month where she is not her normal self. So it looks at it very positively, Alhumdullilah (Praise be to God).

From a gynecologist's point of view, is menstruation clean?

From a gynecologist's point of view, what is menstruation? It is the lining of the uterus. Its blood and tissues. And then when the hormones change in the body and no pregnancy happens, the hormone decreases and lining of the uterus starts shedding. How can it be impure? It is just the lining of the uterus.

We would like to thank Dr Haifaa Younis for taking the time to speak with us and providing the Islamic perspective within this important discussion.



Question Corner



Write down quotes that any of the religious leader or scholars said that you found meaningful:

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What religious stories do you know that positively or neutrally explores the topic of menstruation?

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Have you ever been religiously or culturally shamed for having a period?

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How would you like for people within your culture and/ or religion to view/approach the topic of menstruation?

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