

PURITY: THE EMERGENCE OF A CULTURAL CODE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE¹

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Abstract: The article draws upon the reading of “Western” travelogues from the Ottoman Empire that describe cultural contacts in the early modern era more or less openly in terms of purity and impurity. What does this reading observation mean? It means: whosoever explores concepts of purity and impurity explores an exclusive pattern of meaningfully interpreting the world that serves to convey ambiguity into unambiguity. A pattern that I would like to call a cultural code. The hypothesis of this article is: purity as a cultural code is an invention of the (European) early modern era. Or, expressed slightly differently: it is only in the early modern era that purity becomes the “white ribbon” that points order in the “right” direction. The following fields of inquiry will play a special role here: the victory march of the principle of ethical purity since the late Middle Ages; genesis and raising the profile of confessional cultures; and, not least, naturalization and biologization of lineage.

Prologue

When in the summer of 1480 a Turkish fleet landed in Apulia, sparking a wave of panic across Italy, the Dominican monk Georg von Ungarn decided to put pen to paper in Rome and recorded the story of his twenty-year imprisonment in the Ottoman Empire. The book he wrote was published in the following year, without naming its author, and bore the title *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia Turcorum*. This was reprinted and translated repeatedly over the coming

¹ This essay elaborates thoughts that have occupied me for several years. For a more comprehensive account, see Peter Burschel, *Die Erfindung der Reinheit. Eine andere Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2014).

decades, for example in 1530 as *Chronicle and Description of Turkey* with an introduction by Martin Luther. Although Georg certainly intended his *Tractatus* to be an account of suffering, during the course of which he made eight attempts to escape, he also makes it clear to his readers that the empire of evil is a very orderly place. Virtue – and discipline – prevail here. People here know to hold their tongues when there is a need to be quiet. Above all, though: this is where purity in the sense of “mundicia” or “puritas” reigns. Whether at home or on the streets outside: the Turks’ devotion to purity is so great that they suspect almost all everyday objects, along with almost every activity, of being impure. If they are planning to eat a chicken, they feed it for a whole week exclusively with pure corn despite the fact that they bleed it fully after slaughter. If they want to pray, they make sure they are physically immaculate and pristine, whereby they distinguish between three libations, “lotiones.” Georg dedicates an entire section of his book to this. Nothing if not consistent, Georg also describes in detail how “honeste” the Turks perform their calls of nature, and also warns that any person who – “modo Christianorum” – pees standing up, will be considered by them to be a heretic.²

Although this by no means constitutes the complete tableau of Turkish virtues described in the *Tractatus*, one question can be put off no longer: was someone looking to risk his life thirty years after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople? Or, more specifically: was the Dominican Georg von Ungarn not familiar with Paul’s words in the Titus Epistle (1:15), that unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure? It should not surprise anyone to learn that Georg von Ungarn was indeed familiar with the words – although he reveals this only towards the end of his (one could almost say ethnological) observations, thereby making his *Tractatus* part of the ongoing “Turkish peril” discourse that had coloured Western European perceptions of the Ottoman Empire since the mid-fifteenth century. The purity of the Turks, according to Georg, is merely a superficial purity, a ruse of the devil that moreover serves to lead Christians astray and away from the true faith at the end of time, for, “However perfect the external morals may be: if they arise out of a corrupt, impure and carnal driving force, then they are vexatious.”³

² Georgius de Hungaria/Georg von Ungarn, *Tractatus de moribus, conditionibus et nequicia Turcorum*, ed. Reinhard Klockow (Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau, 1994) 236-37, 228-37, 244-55. The modern edition is based on the first edition 1481, has a substantial introduction and includes a German translation.

³ Georg von Ungarn, *Tractatus de moribus* 346-47.

Purity as a Cultural Code

I have to confess: the first time I read *Tractatus* I almost skimmed over these particular passages. Perhaps because I believed they had little to do with my interest in the political anthropology of intercultural encounters. Perhaps also because I had the impression that this was confirmation – albeit from an unaccustomed perspective – of the medical history credo that the end of the late medieval bathing house culture in Europe gave way to a thoroughly hydrophobic epoch, an epoch that was characterized by relentless warnings about the dire consequences of over-frequent cleansing of the body using water. At the same time, however, I noted that later “Western” reports from the Ottoman Empire also frequently touched upon the subject of the Turks’ preoccupation with cleanliness. These likewise endeavoured to demonstrate that this purity actually constituted impurity. I asked myself against this backdrop – the backdrop of narratives that more or less openly and over a lengthy period of time provided a setting for the discourse of (im)purity – whether there was not more going on here than I had originally assumed. Or, to be precise, whether it is possible to argue that discourse serves to appraise a terrain of ambiguity – for that is the intercultural encounter – while at the same time delimiting this terrain. I decided to widen the scope of my textual sources, and also began exploring English, French, and Italian reports. I would like to set out three findings of my semantically and methodologically “open” or at least “independent” studies:

1. Purity requires impurity. Without impurity there can be no purity. However, the reverse also applies: without purity there can be no impurity. Whosoever aspires to be pure must consign others to a state of impurity. Yet this also means that purity and impurity, to paraphrase Reinhart Koselleck⁴ in the sense of a semantic of shifting historical experience, are binary terms that claim universality. As asymmetrically opposing terms these seek to exclude reciprocal recognition. For this reason, whosoever speaks of purity consequently also expresses identities and alterities.
2. Purity serves to bring perceptions into line and to unify experiences, and by this means to homogenize, stabilize, and ultimately also harmonize interpretations

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 155-91 (Chap. 10, “The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts”).

of self and the world. For this reason, concepts of purity are also always concepts of the proper order of things – wholly within the meaning of Mary Douglas's epochal study *Purity and Danger*, which addressed this relationship from the perspective of impurity, whereby impurity was rigorously identified as "matter out of place."⁵

3. Purity draws boundaries: between religious, social and ethnic groups, yesterday and today, man and woman, human and "unhuman" – to use a term that is not infrequently encountered in travelogues. This consequently means that whosoever endeavours to reconstruct concepts of purity is also always tracing demarcation processes, processes of "marking differences" which for their part reveal who has power, or, to be precise, interpretive power, within the context of a prevailing collective classification system, over truth and untruth, over holy and unholy, and thus frequently also the power to define value and non-value.

If one attempts to draw these results together conceptually, then it is possible to state: whosoever explores concepts of purity and impurity is exploring an exclusive pattern of meaningfully interpreting the world that, by promoting order, generating symbols and guiding actions, serves above all to transport ambiguity into unambiguity, in accordance with a pattern that I would like to call a cultural code.

The White Ribbon

Although this attempted systemization would certainly have enabled me to pursue my project of a political anthropology of intercultural encounters within the context of this article, I took the decision to go down a different path, moving beyond the subject of East-West cultural contacts to explore the "place" of that exclusive pattern of meaningfully interpreting the world during the European early modern era. However, I was – and still am – firmly convinced that purity can still be identified during this supposedly hydrophobic epoch in the form of a cultural code.

Moreover, the more frequently and the more clearly this code was used in Western reports from the Ottoman Empire, including in the *longue durée*, the more emphatically I felt myself being addressed not so much as a historian of the

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 36.

early modern era, but rather as a historical anthropologist. For one thing is clear, however: one grasps purity as a day-to-day practice and body language, as an ethos, cult and ritual, as a medium used to interpret self and the world. It is a historical anthropological challenge par excellence and consequently an opportunity to get to the crux of the early modern era in historical anthropological terms. One may ask, for example, whether the obsessive orderliness that – ever since Lucien Febvre – has often been said to characterize this epoch, abides by the code of purity that, like the “White Ribbon” in Michael Haneke’s film of the same name, mercilessly warns and threatens, demonstrative, mistrustful, alternately appraising and stigmatizing. In this conjunction it is also judicious to involve those canonized processes (and concepts) of social and denominational disciplining, without which it would be impossible to imagine the early modern era.

However, all this also means that even if it is indeed the case that the late medieval centuries were “the dirtiest in the history of Europe,”⁶ as Katherine Ashenburg once declared from a historical hygiene perspective (by no means only with a twinkle in her eye), then this is certainly not irreconcilable with the search for purity in the early modern era. Indeed, one might even say: on the contrary, it is safe to assume that the “dirt” in the history of hygiene and medicine can be traced back to precisely those concepts of purity we are currently examining. At any rate, my hypothesis in a nutshell is: purity as a cultural code is an invention of the (European) early modern era. Or, expressed slightly differently: it is only in the early modern era that purity becomes the “white ribbon” that points orderliness in the “right” direction.

Take-off

Having hurried from Wartburg Castle to Wittenberg in order to put his colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt liturgically in his place, on 13 March 1522 Martin Luther held a *Sermon of the Sacrament* within the framework of his *Invocavit Sermons*. He declared:

You have heard how I preached against the Pope’s foolish laws and opposed his edicts: That no woman shall wash the altar cloth upon which the Host doth lie, not even a pure nun; it must be washed by a pure priest. And if a person doth touch the Host, the priests shall come and cut

⁶ Katherine Ashenburg, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History* (2007) (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008) 95.

off his finger, and many other matters of this nature. [...] We have preached against such foolish edicts and disclosed them. By this means we have demonstrated that whosoever breaches the foolish papal laws and edicts commits no sin, and that a lay person doth not sin if he touches the Chalice or the Host with his hands.⁷

The criticism we find in this excerpt from a sermon is directed towards the liturgical insistence that only “pure hands” may perform sacred acts. This may therefore be interpreted as a call for ritual purity. Drawing upon Old Testament concepts of “pollution,” under which flows of blood and semen, as well as certain foodstuffs, were impure and consequently hindered participation in sacred rituals, it is essentially the case that such demands lapsed with Jesus – and are not likely to have played a significant role in early Christianity. During the course of the Middle Ages, they again began to acquire liturgical significance. At the Reformation Monastery of Cluny, for example, they appear to have been observed with obsessive zeal. It has repeatedly pointed out that the “pollutio” concepts and their implementation helped drive a wedge between the clergy and the laity, thus jeopardizing the “commensality” of the Sacrament; and in view of the quantitatively increasing piety of the laity during the late Middle Ages, there is much to suggest that it was precisely this experience that led to a tangible erosion (or gradualization) of the principle of ritual purity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Incidentally: if the Dominican Georg von Ungarn never tired of describing the Turkish “lotiones,” then this might have something to do with the fact that he was well-aware of this process of erosion.

However, what does this mean for the notion that purity as a cultural code is an invention of the early modern era? Although little is known in the “modern era” about sacred “pollutio” concepts (and “pollution” practices), I am nevertheless confident that I have been able to make an observation: the erosion of the principle of ritual purity is closely linked to the victory march of the principle of ethical purity. It is not that this principle was forgotten during the Middle Ages; and it is not that only groups such as the Cathars based their criticism of ritual purity on references to Mathew 15:1-20 or Mark 7:1-23, which address the purity or impurity of the heart. However, the above discursive profile, in conjunction with the socially effective revitalization of New Testament concepts of purity, began to gather pace only during the course of the fifteenth century. This was not least because it was powerfully interpretive and broadly

⁷ Martin Luther, “Ein Sermon vom Sakrament,” *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 10 (section 3) (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1904) 41-42.

anticlerical, and developed into one of the dynamic and constitutive driving forces behind the process of aligning religion and society. Ultimately, it led to the invigorating Reformation (and post-Reformation) association between “pure word,” “pure teaching” and “pure life.”

To be precise – while at the same time returning to Martin Luther – it is not necessary to stress at the present juncture that the great reformer was hardly criticizing the call for ritual purity in order to cause this to be replaced by demands for ethical purity. Far from it – for this was certainly not his objective. He was not arguing that the effectiveness of the sacraments, and thus the proclamation and ascertainment of “pure word” and “pure teaching,” was contingent upon morally impeccable, i.e., “pure” human conduct. After all, the Fall made any such contingent link impossible. In a sermon on *The Married State* of January 1519, for example, he declared: “Matrimonial love was pure, so long as Adam and Eve had not yet fallen. However, once they had fallen, it was never pure.”⁸ In a sermon held to mark the marriage of Sigmund von Lindenau in August 1545, he argued:

Whosoever begets children outside marriage are still parents. However, they are not legitimate or honourable. That is why it is said that the matrimonial bed shall be pure. That is to say: it shall be neither a whore’s bed, nor an adulterer’s bed. Yet it may be argued: how can the matrimonial bed be pure if there is so much impurity in marriage? Indeed, there is not much purity there. Yet if one wishes to consider impurity, then one may consider the state of maidens and boys. Verily, not all is pure there either. [...] For if one is looking for purity and chastity such as characterizes the angels, one will find that nowhere. Neither in the state of matrimony, nor outside marriage in the state of virginity. These constitute the same state of purity.⁹

On the other hand, Luther repeatedly stressed – and this is where ethical purity comes into play – that the quasi “external” purity transferred at the moment of baptism needs to be understood above all as a task and duty “to become pure.” This is exactly what is meant by the communication of the pure word.

⁸ Martin Luther, “Der nicht von Martin Luther selbst in den Druck gegebene Text des Sermons vom ehelichen Stand. 1519,” *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9 (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1893) 214.

⁹ Martin Luther, “Predigt bei der Hochzeit Sigmunds von Lindenau in Merseburg gehalten,” *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 49 (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1913) 803.

Within this context I return to the marriage sermon of January 1519. In this, Luther, having endeavoured to convince his audience of the impurity of marriage after the Fall, defiantly declares: “Nevertheless, one must work and act to make this pure.”¹⁰ In other words, Luther defines purity as an unequivocally all-enveloping quality given by God through baptism and the word. At the same time, the aim is to persuade people of their moral obligation to achieve purity, without their ever being able to satisfy this obligation during their lifetimes. Or as the *Sermon of the Holy Exalted Sacrament of Baptism* of 1519 states:

Therefore understand that a person becomes innocent, pure and healthy at the moment of baptism, and yet remains full of base proclivities. He is not pure, except in the sense that he has started to attain purity. This same purity has a sign and covenant. And the purer this person becomes, the more God disregards his previous impurity.¹¹

Yet this also means: while Luther consistently emphasizes that no spiritual or temporal order is able to restore the lost purity of heart and body, he also stresses that moral perfection is possible as a moral obligation of the process of attaining purity. He states that “institutional” forms of living can contribute towards this process of achieving perfection; marriage, first and foremost. For it is not merely the case that marriage is divinely ordained – in contrast to the ascetic repudiation of sexuality that is a prerequisite for ritual purity. It also has the force to make the impure thoughts, impure words, and impure actions of spouses, aside from adultery, sufficiently pure that God is able forgive all: “God shields everything with heaven,” as the already-cited sermon of August 1545 unequivocally states, for: “This impurity, says the Lord, I do not wish to see.”¹²

A Great Monastery

There are good reasons to attribute the ethicization of purity to the “Temps des Réformes” that Heinz Schilling, not least, repeatedly qualified as the protracted

¹⁰ Luther, “Der nicht von Martin Luther” 214.

¹¹ Martin Luther, “Eyn Sermon von dem heyligen Hochwirdigen Sacrament der Tauffe,” *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1884) 732.

¹² Luther, “Predigt bei der Hochzeit Sigmunds von Lindenau” 803.

“threshold age.”¹³ It was during the course of this threshold age that the “*societas christiana*” was transformed into the multi-denominational society of the early modern age. However, I nevertheless take the view that ethical purity – in an epochal sense – actually “took off” with Martin Luther. This above all because it seems that Luther’s definition of purity, constituting a moral obligation to become pure, put in a nutshell what in a manner of speaking “lay in the air,” what other “spokesmen” were also articulating or at least attempting to articulate; what, to mention just one particularly high-profile example, was meant by Erasmus of Rotterdam when, in 1518, in a letter to his fellow scholar Paul Volz, he imagined “*civitas*” as a “*magnum monasterium*.”¹⁴ He was certainly not referring primarily to the principle of ritual purity. In modern terms one could also argue: Luther’s definition was – crossing all dogmatic rifts – socially and politically “compatible” and even anthropologically acceptable. Moreover, Luther’s definition compressed and galvanized all those cultural trends that from the late Middle Ages onwards had been endeavouring to reconfigure the “*societas humana*.” Once again, I would like to state that it is certainly possible to emphasize the role played by the Reformation as a “catalyst” of ethical purity. Yet whatever perspective one takes, what we are able to observe since the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century is a remarkable flourishing of purity discourses, purity models, and purity practices.

Whenever the relationship between the sexes, marriage, love, sexuality, children or divorce is addressed, the issue at stake is purity or impurity. Whenever public baths were shut down during this period – up to the year 1534 in Vienna, for example, their number declined within a few decades from 21 to 11 – the authorities cited the danger of syphilis, thus bringing an illness into play that combined “internal” as well as “external” impurity. Whenever attention focused on prostitution during this period – and attention increasingly focused on this issue from the turn of the century onwards – the very same authorities no longer judged the pros and contras in the manner of the late Middle Ages in terms of public order criteria, but instead against the backdrop of the notion that “*puritas vitae*” and “*puritas civitatis*” are in fact one and the same. This also means, however, that during the course of the sixteenth century they steadily shut down the “*Frauenhäuser*,” as brothels tended to be called in sixteenth-

¹³ Heinz Schilling, *Early Modern European Civilization and Its Political and Cultural Dynamism*, The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 2008) 10.

¹⁴ *Opus epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, vol 3: 1517-1519, ed. Percy S. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913) No. 858, 376 (line 561).

century Germany. Wittenberg led the way in 1522 and other cities that had become Protestant soon followed suit: Erfurt, for example, in 1525, and Constance in 1526. This triggered an upsurge in such bans across the whole of Europe. It even gradually spread to Catholic municipalities and territories. In due course, sermons, teachings and not least poetry emphasized the purity of what was being said in the respective category. For however pertinent the Reformers strove to be with their cult of words, even a cursory glance at traditional Catholic sermons of the sixteenth century (and thereafter) clearly shows that these too cited the purity of language and creed. Catholic articulacy, or as it was increasingly called from the seventeenth century onwards, eloquence, now followed the cultural code of purity.

Highlighting Differences

This was not a flash in the pan and it did not end with the “new morality” of the Reformation, on the contrary: the victory march of ethical purity continued and even gathered pace. After all, during the course of the sixteenth century the matrix of pure and impure also began to structure that deep-seated process characteristic of the early modern age that we know as confessionalization. This had a reciprocally energizing effect. It is even possible to say that the question of the origins and profile of denominational cultures is also always a question of drawing boundaries between pure and impure, or, to put it bluntly: confessionalization was purification.

What did this entail in concrete terms? It meant that Catholics and Protestants alike redesigned their church spaces. This was indeed an attempt to comprehensively reconfigure objects and meanings, to use the language of post-modern spatial sociology. It also meant that saints were likely to find themselves relocated to the margins or behind the pillars of heavenly society, if they were not removed from this entirely. In addition, the recruitment process became much tougher. Even Mary Herself was not exempted from purifying campaigns. During the seventeenth century, the Mother of God was only permitted to be pregnant if she was wearing a capacious cloak. It meant that people throughout Europe assumed as a matter of course that other faith communities were pathogenic. It meant that there was also widespread and increasing fear of contamination of “holy texts,” and consequently the fear of contamination of doctrine and faith. Examples may be found in Luther’s so-called Jewish Writings, as well as in the work of the Jesuit “Bollandists.”

This means that processes of denominational differentiation – all the way up to the denominational divide – need to be understood more or less universally as

processes during which boundaries were drawn between pure and impure, and were also repeatedly staged as such, and that church discipline, with its sometimes harsh prohibitions, played an increasingly important role in these processes. Anabaptism and Calvinism, and not least Lutheran Pietism, had above all one goal: the purity of the Eucharistic congregation. After all, the purity of word and the purity of doctrine drew all of these movements much more strongly together to the “*puritas vitae*” than Martin Luther had done.

Ultimately this also means that we, it seems, can identify comparable developments in Jewish diaspora communities in Europe. These developments had a lasting impact on Judaism: they transformed the rabbinic tradition in cabbalistic terms, changing this into orthodoxy. This has also come to be known as confessionalization. At the same time, however, autobiographical texts written by Jews in Aschkenas from the sixteenth century onwards leave no doubt about the importance that accorded to purity discussions and purity practices for processes of “post-traumatic” confidence-building in Judaism. It is frequently noticeable, for example, that it is the rituals of day-to-day sanctification that give rise to differentiation. During voyages, in particular, these customs distinguish between what is near and what is far. In fact, it even seems that the incisiveness of the distinctions, whether relative to Jewish or Christian surroundings, increased substantially after the transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century.

However, it is important to remember that the denominational or confessionalized violence of the early modern era also adhered to the cultural code of purity. Here too, confessionalization constituted purification. Back in 1973, Natalie Zemon Davis was able to demonstrate this, drawing upon the example of the “rites of violence” during the French Wars of Religion. In the interim, this has been confirmed on numerous occasions. Whether victims were mocked and ridiculed, whether tortured, raped or executed, whether corpses were desecrated, the purpose was always to make purity and impurity physically apparent and consequently identifiable. It is also possible to state that the rites of denominational violence were intended to establish unambiguity. It was precisely for this reason that, when the tables were turned, the respective other side was able to make effective use of such phenomena for their own propaganda purposes.

Good Blood, Bad Blood

On 5 June 1449, the Municipal Council of Toledo issued a statute declaring all “*conversos*,” all converted Jews and their Christian descendants – in the language of the edict, “*todos descendientes del perverso linaje de los judíos*” – to

be without honour, without competence, and unworthy of holding a position in the city or in its environs, irrespective of whether this was public or private.¹⁵ Although the statute triggered fierce controversy, and while it is doubtful if it ever became *res judicata*, it nevertheless became a model for other public authorities throughout Spain. Soon thereafter, other cities and regions, along with knightly and mendicant orders, cathedral chapters, and universities likewise issued edicts with the same or similar wordings. In the fifteenth century, the rules were widened to include converts of Muslim origin, so-called “moriscos.” Enjoying papal as well as royal approval from the sixteenth century onwards, the statutes remained in force essentially until 1833.

While their effect differed, and however disparately their interpretive power may be gauged, it is clear that the statutes were an extremely effective means of disseminating (and institutionalizing) a concept that contemporaries called “*limpieza de sangre*,” the “purity of blood,” a concept that aimed primarily to enable the scope of ecclesiastical heresy laws to be widened to include the descendants of converted Jews and Muslims. On the one hand, this equated apostasy and heresy, and on the other – contrary to the Pauline principle of equality before God within the Christian faith – assumed that heretical propensities were inherited through blood. Quite simply, this attitude ignored the meaning of baptism. It was moreover a notion that anthropologized a concept. With its new meaning, it popularized a term that until the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century had been used more or less exclusively to describe the lineage of dogs and horses: the term “*raza*.” To quote from a passage on Jews and conversos in the *Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V* by Fray Prudencio de Sandoval, published in 1604:

Where there is one person of such poor origins, *de tan mala raza*, they exist in large numbers, for this race, *esta gente*, is of such wicked nature, that one suffices to unsettle many. [...] Who can deny that the descendants of the Jews retain and preserve the evil inclinations of ageless ingratitude and lack of insight, as the blacks, *negros*, retain the inseparable characteristic of their black skin. Even if these come together a thousand times with white women, their sons will be born with the black colour of their fathers, *con el color moreno de sus padres*. For it is not enough for a Jew to be three quarters aristocrat or ancient Christian, as one quarter of his

¹⁵ Print of the *Sentencia-Estatuto: Historia de la ciudad de Toledo*, ed. Antonio Martín Gamero (Toledo: Severiano López Fando, 1862) 1036-40.

origin, *raza*, infects him to such an extent that he damages any community in every way imaginable.¹⁶

Although there were also figures who objected to such positions, the trend towards naturalizing heresy nevertheless gathered pace in Spain during the early modern era. It found wide-ranging legal canonization in Juan Escobar del Corro's influential *Tractatus bipartitus de puritate et nobilitate probanda* of 1637. This treatise was more radical than anything that had been published before, above all because it also applied the heresy of Jewish converts to the "ante nati," that is to say to the sons who had been born before the baptism of the father. With this, the ecclesiastical lawyer – and inquisitor – del Corro firmly opposed the distinction that was usually drawn between "ante nati" and "post nati." Furthermore, it also helped to push into the background the concept, still widespread even in Spain at this time, that heresy was first and foremost an intellectual crime.¹⁷

Scholars have frequently argued that this was a specifically Spanish phenomenon, and that this was a direct result of the forced mass baptisms of Jews and Muslims between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. There is certainly some truth in this. For conversos in particular, these mass baptisms opened up social, economic, and ultimately political opportunities, and many conversos were successfully able to seize them. It was perhaps inevitable that tensions arose with the "christianos naturales." Mass baptisms also destabilized those established ethno-religious certainties that – as guarantors of social (and cultural) order – were seemingly of tremendous integrative importance in Spain in the early modern era. This applied in particular to the lower strata of the population. At any rate, it does not appear to be a mere coincidence that one of the protagonists of the "limpieza de sangre" was the Archbishop of Toledo Juan Martínez Silíceo (1486-1557), who was of peasant stock. Unlike the members of the aristocracy, peasants rarely entered into family relationships with conversos, and for social and economic reasons, moreover, they were rarely able to.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that it is not merely in the Spain of the late Middle Ages and early modern age that we are able to observe an increasing trend towards the naturalization or biologization of ancestry. Furthermore, it is by no means only in Spain that this trend began to be articulated through an anthropologized concept of race. There is absolutely no

¹⁶ Based on the edition in the Biblioteca de autores españoles: Fray Prudencio de Sandoval, *Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V* (1606) (Madrid: Editorial Atlas, 1956) 319.

¹⁷ First printed in Lyon. The edition published in Geneva in 1664 was used in this instance, 10-11, 42-45, 53-57, 72.

question, for example, that disputes between the French “noblesse d’épée” and “noblesse de robe” during the early modern era were associated with heated debates about purity and race. This led on the one hand to a veritable cult of the pure-blooded “bonne race,” and on the other to an erosion or perhaps transformation of aristocratic models of virtue. This also applied to biblical teachings on the subject of ancestry that had set the tone in the Middle Ages. In his miscellaneous writings on the “noblesse de France,” the historian Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658-1722) divided the French population into a “race conquérante et patricienne” of Frankish stock, and a Gallo-Roman “race conquise et plébéienne.” In structural terms, the arguments he put forward for this classification were virtually identical to those of Silíceo or del Corro, which in the mid-nineteenth century, incidentally, made it easy for the (self-proclaimed) Comte Joseph Arthur de Gobineau to allude to his ancient and noble compatriot.

Conclusion

It would not be difficult to analyze the process of naturalization more closely – and in a more differentiated manner, whether in the form of a digression concerning Luther’s utterances on “nature,” “blood,” and “flesh” of the Jews; or in the form of an attempt to reconstruct the discourses on skin colour that were associated with this process, not least within the context of the European expansion; or in discussions of Jewish concepts of ethno-religious purity, such as were articulated in the mid-seventeenth century when news spread that descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel had been discovered in the Andes. It would also be possible to continue the process over a longer timeframe, observing how this led to the “race theories” of the eighteenth century and contributed towards the shift from early modern “genealogical racism” to today’s “anthropological racism.” At the same time, it would also be possible to ask what role the process played in the emergence of welfare state concepts that aimed to detoxify the “body politic” in order, in the sense of the population imperative, to improve collective fertility qualitatively as well as quantitatively, and in this conjunction proposed measures that may indeed be called proto-eugenic. A paradigm example would be Johann Peter Frank’s *System einer vollstaendigen medizinischen Polizey* that appeared between 1779 and 1788. Finally, it might also be possible to hunt for traces of this process in European colonies, for example in South and Central America. It was here that concepts of blood purity were used to exclude indigenous “new Christians” from the priesthood. Yet, at the same time, such concepts also accompanied the emergence of “new,” or perhaps rather “new-old” elites.

If I nevertheless wish (and am able) to reach this conclusion, then this is because it would only confirm how closely the early modern era's trend towards naturalizing ancestry, and consequently purity, was associated with the breakthrough of the principle of ethical purity, or, to be precise, with the confessionalization and ultimately the nationalization and incorporation of this principle in the welfare state. To put it bluntly: the thesis that purity as a cultural code was an invention of the early modern era refers precisely to these processes of internal and external demarcation that strove to create above all one thing – unambiguity.

Yet this also means that if it is indeed the case that concepts of purity were concentrated above all in places where collective affiliations were in jeopardy, then it seems to me that the preoccupation with purity that is observable in the early modern era was nothing if not consistent. For there is much to suggest that the specific dynamism of this epoch was brought about by the fundamental collective experience of ongoing dislimitation, not least geographically, an experience that engendered the desire for order that the matrix of pure and impure endeavoured to put right. Is the European early modern era therefore a “pattern book of the modern age”? I do not think so. However, it contains all one needs to become pure, and in particular to cause others to become impure.

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