My Poop, My Self: Identity and Religion through the Lens of Bodily Waste[1]

Adam Bursi

How much is your bodily waste – both the material itself and the act of making it – part of you? This question will strike many as gross, if not entirely inappropriate: rarely do we imagine our identities in terms of what goes on in the bathroom and anthropologists have historically been surprisingly reticent to offer many expansive examinations of the subject. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) how simultaneously mundane and revolting the act and its results may be, the bathroom offers a useful window into thinking about the study of cultural practices and ideologies, including those we call 'religious.' Like so many other bodily habits, doing one's business in the bathroom is inevitably shaped by cultural and/or religious ideas, expectations, and demands: or, as the philosopher Slavoj Žižek phrases it, 'you go to the toilet and you sit on ideology.' Moreover, this very bodily act pops up in discussions about the nature of divinity, humanity, and the distinctions between them. While it is a topic we tend to avoid, we will see that cultures have often found poop to be a material that is, to quote the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'good to think with.'

(Not So) Personal Spaces

Many of the cultural differences surrounding this subject are immediately present when one examines the architecture of the toilet itself, as its design quite literally shapes one's disposition towards the act and its results. As the architectural historian Barbara Penner notes, 'Far from being straightforward pieces of technology, then, bathrooms are culturally determined and historically specific. Social factors like gender, class, race and religion influence their design and shape their use.' Passing over the significantly divergent social expectations and experiences

[1] For the published version, see Adam Bursi, "Mijn poep, mijn zelf. Identiteit en religie door de lens van ontlasting," in *Wie is er bang voor religie? Waarom kennis van religie belangrijk is*, ed. Joas Wagemakers and Lucien van Liere (Almere: Parthenon, 2019), 246–252. Please be aware that the published and the preprint version are not 100% the same. This preprint version is deposited under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC) licence. This means that anyone may distribute, adapt, and build upon the work for non-commercial purposes, subject to full attribution.

involved in using a private bathroom versus a public latrine or a ditch in the ground, even the slightly different designs of toilets present in contemporary European bathrooms can evoke discomfiting experiences for the uninitiated, as well as illustrate differing ideas about the toilet's significance.

Consider, for example, the *Flachspüler* (literally 'flat flusher,' but colloquially called a 'shelf toilet'), a toilet design found in Germany and the Netherlands. Unlike many toilets that disappear waste into a hole or hide it underwater, here a flat surface catches matter, where it lays unavoidably present until the user flushes it away. In contrast to the desire to get rid of waste immediately that is reflected in other toilets' design, the *Flachspüler* allows—if not encourages—a momentary engagement with the body's product to inspect it for regularity and health. This porcelain ledge embodies, as Žižek writes, 'a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body': here favoring a 'reflective thoroughness' rather than the revulsion that we more naturally experience, and which other toilet designs arguably more readily accommodate.

As bathroom layouts materially display, the extremely personal and biological act of relieving oneself is a site where the expectations and ideologies of the surrounding social world nonetheless exert themselves on the individual. To point out another architectural manifestation of this phenomenon, we might note how the historically evolving societal treatments of minority and marginalized groups is often reflected in rules and debates – frequently inflected by religiously-charged vocabulary or framed in sectarian terms, such as with reference to conceptions of 'purity' and 'family values' – about their admittance to public restrooms. Examples include the racially-segregated bathrooms of many countries' recent pasts, as well as the ongoing controversies about the rights of transgender individuals to enter bathrooms corresponding to their gender identities. In these cases, contending conceptions of how society should be organized and how legal rights should be distributed have had, and continue to have, immediate consequences for the simple question of where in the world individuals can perform their bodies' natural functions.

Ethics of Evacuation

In addition to the 'where,' the 'how' of the act of defecation is likewise shaped by a variety of social ideas and concepts. When they are actually vocalized (as opposed to being quietly assumed), modern mandates regarding bathroom behavior are often centered on the prevailing 'quasi-religious' discourses surrounding bodily health. We see this in the 'Squatty Potty,' a short plastic stool upon which a user rests their feet while sitting on the toilet, thereby placing the body in a squatting position and (according to the item's manufacturers) easing pressure upon the rectum. When trying to convince potential customers to incorporate the device into their daily routines, the company's website uses the language of 'optimal elimination without breaking the bank' and asserts that squatting is the 'natural' position, citing the expertise of 'medical doctors, naturopaths, and assorted holistic health professionals.' The religious power of evacuation is even more explicitly witnessed in the proliferation of 'cleanse' diets, in which individuals intermittently fast and limit their nourishment to a specific regimen of juices and other liquids. Here, the assumed health benefits of an increased volume of daily bowel movements (powered by this liquid diet) is frequently linked with conceptions of both bodily and nonmaterial 'purity' through an improvement in the individual's 'spiritual and emotional GPS,' as the cleanse guru Alejandro Junger terms the digestive system. Assumedly only these kinds of very modern metaphysical promises of health improvements could persuade many consumers to add a new piece of furniture to their bathrooms (or, as the Squatty Potty company phrases it, to "relearn the first thing you learned") or to limit their food intake to certain fruit and vegetable extracts.

In some contexts, we also find factors other than health – including explicitly doctrinal factors – deployed as determiners of the way the body should be arranged when using the bathroom. For example, the toilet rules laid out in ancient rabbinic Jewish texts suggest that one should keep in mind the earthly location of the sacred when arranging oneself at the privy: one should face at such an angle that waste is not produced in the direction of the temple in the holy city of Jerusalem. While different rabbis debated the specific ways of carrying out this precept, 'these practices,' the Jewish Studies scholar Rachel Neis writes, 'actively inserted the temple's coordinates as those from which the body - wherever it was – took direction.' A similar

attention to bodily orientation during toilet practices appears in early Islamic texts, where the concern is in facing away from the holy city of Mecca while relieving oneself. In both these cases, bodily posture is influenced by conceptions of sacred geography, foregrounding explicitly religious considerations within the act of elimination.

As these Jewish and Islamic sources illustrate, the issue of how to use the bathroom was (and is) a question imbued with ritual significance according to several religious traditions, leading to sometimes substantial discussions of what correct bathroom practice should look like. Within some of the Jewish texts mentioned above, stories depict the famous first-century Rabbi Akiva following his teacher into the loo, where he watches to observe his teacher's bathroom procedure. Asked what he is doing, Rabbi Akiva responds, 'This is Torah and I must learn!' Here, manners in the bathroom are presented as part of the corpus of religious knowledge (or 'Torah') that Akiva wishes to acquire. Such behavioral rules were similarly incorporated into discussions of Islamic ritual practice, where the bathroom-specific recommendations of the Prophet Muhammad and other prominent Muslims compose a small part of the body of shariah law.

For those wondering what Jesus would do, however, Christians had far more ambiguous answers, as the very question of whether or not Jesus used the bathroom at all was a topic of doctrinal debate. Some early Christians considered it strange, if not impossible, that Christ – who was believed by Christian orthodoxy to embody simultaneously both full divinity and full humanity – would actually need to relieve himself. If Jesus was fully human, would that not mean that he necessarily produced bodily waste? But would God really do so? Within the first centuries of the church, several theologians brought forth various arguments for why Jesus did not actually produce excrement: even if he was fully human, he did not have to be *fully* human. As Candida Moss, a historian of Christianity, writes, 'Today there's really no 'official' position on Jesus' bathroom habits,' but it was quite a loaded question for early Christian thinkers.

Being and Nothingness

A core part of the human condition, the production of bodily waste is often drawn upon within theological discourse to distinguish humanity from the divine. This is witnessed not only in

Christian discussions of Jesus' digestion, but throughout different religious traditions' conceptions of what existence in the afterlife is (or will be) like. Throughout Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts, punishment in hell is not infrequently depicted as involving the constant smell of feces, if not being buried under mounds of it: a continuation, and indeed amplification, of some of the most unpleasant aspects of the terrestrial world.

Conversely, life in paradise is said to involve a complete break from the fetid waste typical to earthly life, and is instead characterized by an existence utterly free of urination and defecation. Descriptions of paradise within Islamic texts, for example, state that the garden's blessed inhabitants will have no anuses – as they will have no need for them – and will simply release their bodily residues through their skin in the form of a pleasantly perfumed sweat. Medieval Jewish and Christian theologians similarly promised that the bodies of the residents of the world to come would not produce excrement: suffering none of the continual flux of earthly human life and its constant consumption, digestion, and elimination, their resurrected bodies would instead be perfectly whole and unchanging.

Usually avoided in polite conversation, bodily excretions are nonetheless distinctly social issues, heavily influenced by the surrounding societal behavioral norms and shared ideas. Among the important influencers of these norms and ideas are the world's religious traditions, which often have their own perspectives on the human body and its usage, including at the toilet. Taking into account these different viewpoints, we see how even the very mundane aspects of everyday life can, in fact, be fraught with ideological baggage and even function as enactments of communal identity. Indeed, the heavy ideological weight of defecation is clear from its appearance in theological discussions of Christology and the afterlife. As this brief chapter has attempted to highlight, rather than a trivial subject, the ways that humans deal with their bodily wastes is a matter of significant importance on a variety of ritual and ideological levels. The academic study of religion offers a particularly useful set of tools for examining these connections and oppositions between the excremental, the ceremonial, and the sublime.

Bibliography

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

Barbara Penner, *Bathroom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso Books, 1997).

Bio

Adam Bursi is een postdoctoraal onderzoeker aan de Universiteit Utrecht in het ERC-project "SENSIS: The Senses of Islam." Hij verdiende zijn doctoraat aan de Cornell University in 2015. Zijn werk onderzoekt de vroege islam in de context van de late oudheid and en in gesprek met gelijktijdige vormen van jodendom en Christendom. Hij heeft lessen over religie gegeven aan verschillende universiteiten in de Verenigde Staten en zijn artikelen zijn verschenen in *Studies in Late Antiquity*, het *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*, en elders.