

**THE RELEVANCE OF THE ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES ON  
CLEANLINESS TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES: FOCUS ON  
HAND WASHING**

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**Abstract**

The Qur'an unequivocally declares that it "guides unto the way that is best" Q17:9 this connotes that every way of life that a person decides to take Qur'an guides unto the best of that way. The Qur'an declares thus "O ye who believe! When ye rise up for prayer, wash your face, and your hands up to the elbows," People all over the world especially medical luminaries are clamouring for washing of hands as a means of checking some communicable diseases. If this is a means of checking ebola for example, one feels that a second look needs to be taken at the concept of cleanliness in Islam with particular reference to washing of hands. It is in this vein that this paper intends to review the Islamic tenets of cleanliness especially as it relates to hand washing which has recently been proven to be not merely a religious dogma, but rather a profound natural law designed by the originator of nature itself. In this age in which everything is measured by its conformity with experimental discoveries the protagonists of this notion have themselves discovered that Qur'anic statements do reveal natural phenomena in its real form. The paper portrays the relevance of Islamic rituals to the mundane life. Moreover, these discoveries should refine the minds and render them dispassionate when making analysis of the role of Islam in proffering preventive solution to diseases. The paper draws inferences from Islamic jurisprudential texts and the wisdom of the divine commandments on hand washing rituals which corroborates the declarations of contemporary medical luminaries on the benefits of hand washing. It then behoves all and sundry to care to read the Qur'an in order to be guided unto the way that is best.

**Keywords:** Hands, Cleanliness, Washing, Ablution, Hygiene.

## **Introduction**

The comprehensiveness of Islam is demonstrated in all its teachings which cover all aspects of human life. Indeed, a demonstration of its meaning as a religion of peace is manifest in its teaching to be in peace with one's creator, one's self and other creatures of Allah. One maintains peace with Allah, his creator by maintaining cleanliness and purity at all times, as Allah Himself is clean and pure and does not accept any unclean and impure act from His servants. A means of being in peace with oneself is to maintain cleanliness and prevent diseases that could come from being dirty. Peace can also be maintained with fellow human beings through personal cleanliness. Therefore, cleanliness of the body, clothes, place and that of the mind, heart and soul constitutes what Islam is. In fact Islam aims at building a society where individuals can live an ideal, pure and clean life physically and spiritually. One important part of the body through which purification is done is the hand. Hands are a pair of limbs, which the Lord bestows on mankind and many other creatures. The Lord Almighty Himself has described Himself as possessing hands in some verses of the Qur'an such as the following:

He said: O Iblis! What hindered thee from falling prostrate before that which I have created with both My hands? Art thou too proud or art thou of the high exalted (Q38:75)

In this verse, according to Tabari, Allah has informed his servants that "He has actually created Adam with His two hands."<sup>1</sup> Since the hand is one of the divine attributes, then no doubt, it is one of the most important organs of the body of mankind, and its uses are indeed numerous and vital. Most significant of these functions is the work of fashioning out things as well as beautifying them. Moreover, Allah has described himself as having two hands, which also emphasize the importance of having a pair of hands.

The Qur'an tells us that most important works and even the less important ones, as well as huge and gigantic projects were executed by the power of the hands. Similarly, Prophet Nuh (Noah) was endowed with the talent and skill to build a mighty ship with which he and his people took refuge against the mighty flood and they were saved. "Build the ship under Our Eyes and by Our inspiration, and speak not unto Me on behalf of those who do wrong. Lo! They will be drowned". (Q11:37)

Also, Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) used to engage his subjects, which included all living creatures visible and non-visible that abound under his rule, "They made for him what he willed: synagogues and

statues, basins like wells and boilers built into the ground” (Q34:13). All these achievements are made through the use of hands. Looking at the usefulness of hands to human beings, it is only fitting that the hands should be kept clean at all times as their state of impurity may affect the health of their owners. Islam therefore has made washing of hands a cornerstone of purification. The recent call for washing of hands as a means of checking infections such as that of Ebola is not a new concept in Islam.

### **Hand washing ritual**

The basis of purification in the Qur’an is rendered thus: “Truly Allah loves those who turn unto Him, and loves those who have a care for cleanness (Q2:222). Similarly, a Muslim is required to maintain absolute cleanliness when handling the Qur’an. The Qur’an declares, “Which none touches save the purified”. (Q56:79) The Qur’an also says, “And if you are unclean, then purify yourselves” (Q5:6) *Ṣalāt* (Prayer) is one of the most important tenets of Islam which cannot be done without purification of the body. The instruction to purify oneself in preparation for *Ṣalāt* is contained in a portion of the previously quoted verse: “O ye who believe! When ye rise up for prayer, wash your face, and your hands up to the elbows, and lightly rub your heads and (wash) your feet up to the ankles”. (Q5:6) Prophet Muhammad had equally declared that “Cleanliness is half of faith”.<sup>2</sup>

As for the type of water that is desirable to be used for cleaning, the Qur’an says, “And (We) sent down water from the sky upon you, that thereby He might purify you” (Q8:11) Additionally, Qur’an says, “and We send down purifying water from the sky”. (Q25:48) Therefore, the following types of water fall under the Qur’anic prescription: Rain water, Sea or River water, Water of melting snow or hail, Water of a big tank or pond, Well water and Spring or bottled water.

The Almighty said: (and sent down water from the sky upon you, that thereby He might purify you.), that God sent down rain from the sky the day of *Badr* to cleanse the faithful in preparation for their prayers, because that day some of them had woken up in a state of (*Janaba*) major impurity –which required ritual bathing-while they had run out of water. When God sent down water they were washed and purified. Allah further rescued them from the snare of Satan who had confused them by hurling them in to grief due to the condition in which they found themselves but Allah freed them from worries by sending rain. The rain was sent down to strengthen their hearts and revived their confidence and cement their

resolve when they met with the enemy on the plain of Badr. According to the submission of Al-Tabari Allah Al-mighty had physically cleansed the Companions of the Prophet with the rain. Therefore rain water tops the list of usable types of water followed by other classes of water<sup>3</sup>.

As for the definition of water to be used for purification, it is that which comes down from heaven or stems from the Earth, and one of its three descriptions "color, taste or smell" has not changed by some of the things that dispossess it of its original purity. Maliki School said: used water does not deprive it from being pure. Therefore, used water can be used again for the ritual of ablution or any other ritual only that it is preferable to use a fresh one<sup>4</sup>.

### **Washing Away Defecation/Urine using Water (*Istinjā'*)**

The actual activity of cleanliness using water is termed *Istinjā'*, 'It is obligatory on every Muslim who is able to carry it out, and must be done with clean water. Certain conditions abound while undertaking *Istinjā'*. These are:

- 1- The washing of the pudendum after the stoppage of the defecation.
- 2- Before embarking on the actual washing, the person must wipe out stool/urine completely.
- 3- Only the left hand is to be used for the removal of the defecation/urine and the washing and rubbing of the dirt.
- 4- The hand must be scrupulously cleaned after the whole activity of *Istinjā'*<sup>5</sup>

### **Scrubbing Away Defecation (*Istijmār*)**

This means cleanliness without water mainly by using stones and leaves or tissue paper in the modern times or anything like it, which wipes away the dirt. This can take the place of water in case of its acute shortage but preferably, a Muslim is expected to employ both scrubbing and washing of the dirt.<sup>6</sup>

### **Spheres of Hand Washing Rituals in Islam**

One important aspect of Islamic rituals where washing of hands is prominent is ablution (*wudhu'*). A prophetic narration to this effect is from Abd-Khairin who said he had witnessed Nasa'i as narrated from Abd-Khairin, that he had witnessed Ali bin Abi-Talib someday when he requested for a chair and he sat down, and then he asked for a vessel of water. He then began to perform ablution. He washed his hands three

times, rinsed his mouth three times. He inhaled and sneezes out water in his nose three times. He washed his hands up to the elbows three times. He washed his face three times. Then he wet his hands, and wipe his head with them. Then he washed his feet three times, and finally he said, whoever delights in seeing the way the Prophet used to perform his ablution this was it.<sup>7</sup>

Another area where washing of the hands is recommended is during the washing and shrouding of a corpse. A person saddled with the responsibility of preparing a corpse must wash his hands thoroughly before and after the preparation of the dead body.

Another is when one incurs a major impurity that requires him to take a bath, for example, when he has sexual intercourse. The Qur'an says: "And if you are unclean then purify yourselves" (Q5:6) Similarly, The Prophet said: "When two genitals meet then bathing becomes mandatory."<sup>8</sup> The bathing significantly involves washing of hands. Abu Salamah reported that he once asked Aisha about the Prophet's manner of bathing for major impurity, and she said to me that he would pour water, wash his hands three times, and then wash his private part then he would wash his hands again. He would then wash his head three times and then wash his whole body<sup>9</sup>

In the aspect of cleaning of clothes, the use of hand is equally involved. The Glorious Qur'an declares that a believer should thoroughly wash his clothes thus: "Thy raiment purify". (Q74:4). This also involves the use of the hands. After the expiration of menses or lochia. The Qur'an says:

They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say: It is a harmful thing, so let women alone at such time and go not in unto them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you. Truly Allah loves those who turn unto Him, and loves those who have a care for cleanness. (Q2:222).

Cleanliness is so important in Islam that the very second revelation to its Prophet was about it i.e. *Mudaththir*. It emphasizes the necessity of maintaining absolute cleanliness of the body and garment of a Muslim (Q.74:4). The proper etiquette of going to the Toilet and answering the call of nature has been laid down in Islam. This includes the importance of using water to clean oneself after defecation or urinating as against using paper alone in the modern times. The right hand is assigned with the task

of doing things like ablution and taking food, while the left hand is used in cleaning dirt and so on. Ibn Majah narrated from reports of Abdullahi bin Abi Qatadah who said his father had told him that the Prophet (SAW) had said “when one of you urinates he should not hold his private part with his right hand and he should not perform the clean-up with the right hand”.<sup>10</sup> Among the *Sunnah* of the Prophet is cutting his nails regularly. Obviously this is in order to keep the hands tidy and free from germs because uncut nails serve as convenient deposit place for dirt and ultimately become a source of infection. He was said to have declared thus:

Abu Hurairah (RA) reported that the Prophet (SAW) said: Five things are from the traditions of the Prophets of the old: circumcision, removing the hair below the navel, trimming the moustaches, cutting the nails and removing the hair of the armpit<sup>11</sup>

### **Spiritual benefits of ablution**

Nu'am Al- Mujmir said: Once I went up the roof of the Mosque, along with Abu Huraira. He performed ablution and said, I heard the Prophet saying, on the Day of Resurrection, my followers will be called “*Al-Ghurr-ul-Muhajjalun*” (glimmering of forehead and knee) from the traces of Ablution and whoever can increase the area of his radiance should do so (i.e. by performing ablution regularly).<sup>12</sup>

### **Medical benefit of performing ablution**

The benefits of washing one's hands are innumerable. It is known that the washing of hands (be it with or without warm water and soap), is a vital part in fighting cross-infection of all types. It can also prevent a wide range of acute respiratory infections, helminthes (parasitic worm) infections, eye infections, and diarrheal disease. in a research headed by Professor Chris Del Mar of Bond University concludes that:

Physical barriers, such as regular handwashing and wearing masks, gloves and gowns may be more effective than drugs to prevent the spread of respiratory viruses like influenza and SARS<sup>13</sup>.

Prophet Muhammad said: whoever performed ablution properly all his wrongdoings will come out of his body till they come out from under his limbs<sup>14</sup>. This report has thus been exquisitely corroborated by modern day scientists who have gone a step higher than acquiescing to the

tendency of absolute secularism in expressing the solemn spiritual truth. They made statements such as the following:

Dr. Ahmed Shawqi Ibraheem the member of the Royal Medical Association in London and the consultant of International and heart diseases says that scientists came to know that the fall of the light in the water during ablution and also on the dots of water on the body gives birth to negative Ions and reduces the positive Ions and consequently it relaxes the nervous and muscles pain as well as tension and anxiety. This fact is confirmed also by an American scientist who says: “water has a magic effect even the dazzle of water on face and hands – he means ablution – is the best means of achieving relaxation and eliminating tension<sup>15</sup> .

Prophet Muhammad has certainly spoken the truth when he in one occasion admitted that: “Anger is from Satan and Satan is made of a blazing fire so when one of you becomes angry let him perform ablution because it quells the anger”<sup>16</sup>. The writer of this paper reminiscence on the past and remembers an episode about ten years ago that occurred in his life when he had a row with his elder brother in which some nasty words were thrown at him and he became highly enraged. This Prophetic admonition was what came to his mind and he quickly performed the ablution and as a result the frenzied mood he had been subjected to completely disappeared, immediately.

### **Hand Washing for Hygienic Purpose**

A Muslim believes that the hand is a divine gift from the creator. Therefore, Muslims are expected to use their hands responsibly. This simply entails using the hand for the good and benefit of one’s self and of the environment, both immediate and distant, at all times. A sane person by impulse knows that he needs to take care of his hands by washing them when immersed in dirt. This is no less than a reflex action that one performs without any conscious effort. Why does the world now need to be told to develop the habit of hand washing to avoid infection from various types of diseases? Different organizations have mapped out strategies and schemes for hand washing, enumerating the immense benefits this action. For example, Mayo clinic has this to say:

Hand washing does not take much time or effort, but it offers great rewards in terms of preventing illness. Resolve today to adopt this simple habit as a way to help protect your health<sup>17</sup> .

Similarly, another top ranking official, Director of the Global Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing Secretariat, made an astounding remark that buttresses Prophet Muhammad's call for caution against untidiness especially of the hands.

Hand washing protection works by washing the infection-causing germs off your hands before they get a chance to infect you, and before you accidentally touch things that could help spread these infection-causing germs to other people," says Dr Layla McCay, Secretariat Director of the Global Public Private Partnership for hand washing. "Wet your hands with water, lather with soap for 20 seconds, rinse with running water, and shake your hands dry. Remember: infection-causing germs are too small to see with the naked eye, so you should wash your hands after any possible exposure<sup>18</sup>

Prophet Muhammad had forerun the likes of Dr. Layla, since he had instructed that whenever one awakes from sleep he should first wash his hands. It was reported by Abu Hurairah that the Prophet had said: "When one of you wakes up from slumber he should wash his hands since he does not know where his hands had been while he was asleep."<sup>19</sup>

In a research undertaken by Tamer Rabie and Valerie Curtis which is titled "Hand washing and risk of respiratory infections: A quantitative systematic review" the authors submit that (WHO 2202) Acute respiratory tract infections (ARI) causes at least 2 million deaths a year. This research further concludes that

The results show a coherent and significant pattern of impact of hand cleansing on ARI infection. This is impressive but possibly not surprising given the substantial body of evidence that hand washing can cut the risk of microbial and viral hand contamination and prevent nosocomial infection. This study adds evidence that ARIs and other contagious illness can be prevented by hand-washing<sup>20</sup>

The paper further admits that,

If hand cleansing can reduce the risk of ARIs by 16% and diarrheal disease by almost half, then it may represent a feasible option for developing countries, where hand washing rates are currently low, but soap and water are, in most cases, readily



available. Small scale studies have shown that improving hand washing is possible<sup>21</sup>

### **Hand Washing for Preventing Diarrhea**

In a study titled “Effectiveness of hand washing in preventing SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) the authors in discussing the result of the study made the following submission:

The evidence available is somewhat ambivalent. Nine out of the ten epidemiological studies which evaluated the effect of hand washing as a precautionary measure against SARS found that hand washing was significantly associated with reduced chances of acquiring SARS, whether in the hospital or community setting, in the univariate analysis<sup>22</sup>

The Prophet warned his followers thus: “whoever sleeps with hand immersed with oil without washing it should blame himself over what may happen to him”.<sup>23</sup> Consultant Pediatrician, Olikoye Ransome Kuti Children Emergency Room, Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Dr. Babayemi Osinaike said one of the factors driving the transmission of disease includes lack of awareness on the benefits of hand washing with good water and soap.

Narrated Asma’ bint Abu Bakr: The Prophet said regarding menstruation blood that soils a garment, “She should scrape it, rub it with water (using her fingers), then wash it. Then she may pray in it.”<sup>24</sup> Narrated Abu Huraira: Khaula said, “O Messenger of Allah, suppose the traces of blood do not go away?” He said, “(Washing it) with water will suffice you, and its traces will not harm you.”<sup>25</sup> To clarify the position of using soap or its equivalents, Imam Faisal in his Fiqh class made the following submission:

The Prophet commanded her to scrape, rub, and then wash. He did not just say, “Wash it,” and that suffices. Then he says, “Its traces will not harm you” since she has tried her best. But today detergents are available, and there is no hardship. Using such simple cleansers causes the bloodstain to be removed. Why should we not use it? Thus, this Prophetic advice regarding how to cleanse the garment can be understood to mean, use whatever means are available to you that will not harm the garment.

Furthermore, a Former Minister of the Nigerian Government while serving, had officially joined the ongoing campaign of hand washing. The Minister took it upon herself to stroll around in her effort to create awareness among the populace. The Minister, Mrs. Sarah Ochekepe even visited markets and motor parks, and in one of her outings she was quoted as saying:

The Ebola disease had become more deadly than HIV/ AIDS because of its high mortality rate. Ochekepe restated the commitment of the government to tackle the disease. The disease, she said, has brought sleepless nights to Nigerians. She urged the citizens to wash their hands constantly after contact with anything, adding that hand washing will save the people from troubles. She said the government will do everything possible to prevent the death of more Nigerians from Ebola. “If you do not wash your hands, Ebola can come in contact with you. It can kill you, your family and the entire village,” she said. She called on the people to take hand washing seriously, urging them to keep their environments clean. Sanitation, according to the Minister will save citizens from dying from disease<sup>26</sup>.

The Federal Government is advised to take to the counsel of Prophet Muhammad who had talked about the importance of cleanliness. This is contained in a report that was narrated by (Bukhari) that the Prophet, one day, asked his Companions a question thus: “If there was a river in front of the house of one of you and he takes a dip inside it five times daily, would there remain any dirt on his body? They replied saying no! There would not be any dirt on his body. He then said such was the example of five daily prayers one keeps himself tidy and also Allah erases one’s misdemeanors with it.<sup>27</sup>

It is expedient to end this paper with the analysis of WHO (World Health Organization) over the religious and cultural aspects involved in this campaign of hand washing. This piece is actually a reflection of Islam with regard to the issue of hand washing. The document says:

Of the five basic tenets of Islam, observing regular prayer five times daily is one of the most important. Personal cleanliness is paramount to worship in Islam. Muslims must perform methodical ablution before praying and clear instructions are given in the Qur’an as to precisely how these should be carried out. The Prophet Muhammad always urged Muslims to wash

hands frequently and especially after some clearly defined tasks. Ablutions must be made in freely running water and involve washing the hands, face, forearms, ears, nose, mouth and feet, three times each. Additionally, hair must be dampened with water. Thus, every observant Muslim is required to maintain scrupulous personal hygiene at five intervals throughout the day, aside from his/her usual routine of bathing as specified in the Qur'an. This habit transcends Muslim of all races, cultures and ages, emphasizing the importance ascribed to correct ablution<sup>28</sup>

Going by the content of this submission, we can clearly discern the emphasis which Islam places on the issue of personal cleanliness, especially that of the hands, one of the vital organs in the body. By the power of the hand, everything is possible. It is also obvious that a person who considers this a duty and is used to taking care of his hands almost most moments of the day needs no one's campaign to do what he has been doing and will continue to do so forever. What the campaigners need to do is to persuade their clients to adopt the Islamic etiquette of maintaining hygienic hands.

### **Conclusion**

Every Muslim believes that Qur'an is both a book of guidance and a book of laws. This same status is attributed to other revealed scriptures. However, humankind has chosen to remain detached from the revealed scriptures thinking that he, by himself, can come out with a better alternative. The safest thing for the movers and shakers of the world affairs to do is to be truly liberal in all affairs. Prophet Muhammad enjoined Muslims to take wisdom wherever they found it and that means from whomever they learnt it. This is a cardinal principle that would make things easy and reduce many hurdles. Considering the beautiful and candid way in which WHO presented the Islamic method of maintaining care for the hands, one expects them go further by officially endorsing it, even in the exclusively Muslim dominated areas.

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