

THE HISTORY OF THE CURSE:
A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL TABOOS OF
MENSTRUATION AND THE INFLUENCE THEY HAVE ON AMERICAN
SOCIETY TODAY

by

Samantha B. Webster

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Approved by:

Dr. Kent Brintnall

Dr. Joanne Robinson

Dr. Sean McCloud

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ABSTRACT

SAMANTHA B. WEBSTER The history of the curse: a comparative look at the religious and social taboos of menstruation and the influence they have on American society today. (Under the direction of DR. KENT BRINTNALL).

James Frazer, in his late 19th century book *The Golden Bough*, examined superstitious beliefs about women, menstruation, and the taboos of fear and anxiety that menstruating women caused in various societies. “Drops of menstrual blood upon the ground or in a river kill plants and animals; wells run dry if a menstruating woman draws water from them; men become ill if they are touched by or use any objects that have been touched by a menstruating woman; beer turns sour if a menstruating woman enters a brewery, and beer, wine, vinegar, milk, and jam go bad if touched by a menstruating woman.”¹ In the 1930s, there were attempts by scientists to prove that menstruating women exuded menotoxins and other poisonous elements in their menstrual blood, perspiration, saliva, urine, and tears.² Most Western cultures within today’s society do not believe in such menotoxins, nor menstruation taboos; however, the effects of said taboos are still widely influential in today’s society. Therefore, most women believe that it is at least good manners, and sometimes necessary, to hide evidence of menstruation not only from public view, but in private as well.³

From being banished to the shed, to the requirement of fasting and prayer of cleansing, to the evolution of hiding a large pack of maxi pads in her grocery basket

¹ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1951), 532-534.

² Joan Chrisler, "Leaks, Lumps, and Lines: Stigma and Women's Bodies," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2011), 203

³ Ibid.

behind items she does not even need, why are women told to be ashamed of a bodily function that they have no control over?⁴ Through this project, I would like to examine ways in which various menstruation taboos arise through negative religious implications. From there, I will examine how these taboos negatively effect woman's sexuality and examine the ways in which American cultures view period shaming and why it has to stop. In addition to this, I will examine ways in which the ideals behind menstrual periods are starting to be liberated through the use of neo-Pagan rituals of today, and views of menstrual blood as a sign of liberation of female power. Overall, I argue that the negative ideals behind menstrual taboos should be abolished and liberation of menstruation should be exemplified.

⁴ Jane Greenhalgh and Michaeleen Doucleff, *NPR*, October 17, 2015, "A Girl Gets Her Period and is Banished to the Shed," <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/10/17/449176709/horrible-things-happen-to-nepali-girls-when-they-menstruate-15girls>, (last accessed May 10, 2016).

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INTRODUCTION: THE MENSTRUAL TABOO CRISIS

Blood is kinda like snot. How come it's not treated that way? People with runny noses do not hide their tissues from colleagues and family members. They do not die of embarrassment when they sneeze in public. Young girls do not cringe if a boy spies them buying a box of Kleenex. Caught without a hanky on a cold day, people sometimes use their sleeves; they are sheepish but not humiliated. They do not blush or stammer or hide the evidence. No one celebrates congestion. It is inconvenient and occasionally, when accompanied by a cold, decidedly unpleasant. But those who suffer publically—*ah choo!*—are casually blessed. It is, in essence, no big deal.⁵

Menstruation, according to the Society for Menstrual Research, is the most important biological difference between females and males. The Society for Menstrual Research believes this biological difference has been used for an extremely long time to discriminate against women and girls.⁶ “Challenging the shame and secrecy surrounding the menstrual cycle, encourages *embodied consciousness*, or a more meaningful and complex appreciation of bodies across the lifespan.”⁷ At a very young age, females are being taught that the natural cycles which their bodies go through are “dirty” and should be concealed. Women should be able to take on their own liberation of their menstrual cycles and appreciate what it means to be a woman.

The normality of the menstrual cycle is far from “normal.” Society tends to be more talkative about any other bodily function than menstruation. This biologically constructed field is highly bound by cultural values and taboos. “Though there is not a comprehensive cross-cultural comparison of menstruation, anthropologists have reported extensively on various cultural practices surrounding menstruation ranging from severe

⁵ Karen Houppert, *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*, (New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 4.

⁶ Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, “The Menstrual Cycle: A Feminist Lifespan Perspective,” *SWS Fact Sheet*, 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

social restriction to special respect and privilege for menstruating women.”⁸ The taboos of menstruation shape many religious and cultural practices across the world. According to the “Menstruation Facts Sheet” produced by the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, theorists, including psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Karen Horney, tried to account for the existence of menstrual taboos. Freud claimed that menstrual taboos were an attempt to control women, while Horney believed that male fear of menstruation had roots in castration anxiety.⁹ Some feminists critique the uses of taboo to disenfranchise women, but not all menstrual prohibitions are equally disadvantageous and women assert their agency in the particular cultural and religious contexts in which various menstrual practices are embedded.¹⁰ The effect of these taboos demonstrate why such thinking should be abolished.

Taboo, according to anthropologist Karen Petree, is one of the most appropriate words to describe the anxieties that are experienced when discussing this subject matter. “Although anthropologists use a more precise definition of the word, the term is commonly used in American popular culture to denote a perceived abhorrence, thus the proverbial ‘menstrual taboo’ implies not an actual taboo but rather what is seen as a culturally embedded aversion to menstruation.”¹¹ The most serious flaw in social science analysis of this subject, according to Petree, has been that much of the symbolic meaning

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962); Karen Horney, *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

¹⁰ Society for Menstrual Cycle Research.

¹¹ Karen Petree, “Tabooing the Taboo: Toward an Ethnography of Menstruating Third Wave Feminists,” 2010, <http://cdn.nycitynewsservice.com/blogs.dir/549/files/2013/04/Tabooing-the-Taboo.pdf>, (last accessed March 15, 2017), 1.

surrounding menstruation is taken as inherent, irrefutable truth.¹² This menstrual taboo crisis can end, if and when men and women alike stand up and simply talk about normal bodily functions. This menstrual “taboo”, I argue, is not in the menstrual blood, but more so in the way cultures view and react to the cycle itself. The way in which women are being looked down upon for something they have no control over is completely absurd.

The taboos associated with menstruation have been a generative subject in psychological, medical, and anthropological fields for centuries. Many attempts have been made across not only these disciplines, but others as well, to uncover universal origins of the menstruation taboo to find a justification for the subordination of women. According to anthropologists Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, menstruation has been frequently cited as the “ultimate taboo.”¹³

Elizabeth Faithorn, a feminist anthropologist, has written that many male anthropologists’ conception of women in general, tends to be quite negative and biased as evidenced in the abundant descriptions of sexually dichotomous cultures in which women are exclusively polluters and men are singled out as their victims.¹⁴ Anthropologist Marvin Harris describes the menstrual taboo from some societies by stating, “Band and village societies consider women to be unclean during menstruation.”¹⁵ He also describes how some societies believe male clubhouses are a safe haven from which women are

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, “Introduction: A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism,” *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 26.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Faithorn, “The Concept of Pollution Among the Káfe of the Papua New Guinea Highlands,” *Toward and Anthropology of Women*. R. Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review, 1975), 128-30.

¹⁵ Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 85.

excluded and where men can protect themselves from a woman's "dirtiness". Harris' research also describes that menstrual blood requires the construction of men's clubhouses where men can seek protection, and in this, the ritual use of semen is believed to improve the well-being of the entire society.¹⁶ "The opposition between pollutive menstrual blood and the rejuvenating characteristics of semen reflect Harris' assumption that society can be organized into mutually exclusive categories."¹⁷ These categories are explicitly defined as men being better than women.

Now that taboo and menstrual uncleanness have been defined, I assert that a call for liberation of the menstrual cycle needs to occur in the twenty-first century. Petree believes this lack of objectivity on the part of ethnographers has hindered the development of an examination of menstruation in the United States. "With the exception of a handful of female anthropologists such as Margaret Mead Ruth Benedict, and Mary Douglas, it is an incontestable fact that most ethnographic descriptions of menstruation were reduced to mechanical descriptions of segregation, pollution, and ritual uncleanness, dictated and defined by men."¹⁸ This is why I fully believe the topic of menstruation should be examined using cultural lenses that promote liberation. I believe this topic should also be examined in light of religious rituals because of the implications and influential practices that shape societal views of what it means to menstruate.

¹⁶ Petree, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

What is Menstruation?

In order to fully understand the liberation cause, it is imperative that a definition of menstruation and the menstrual cycle be set into place. According to the Society for Menstruation Research, menstruation cycles, on average, last anywhere from 21-35 days, but variability is common shortly after menarche¹⁹ and also before menopause. A unique egg and its surrounding cells create each menstrual cycle. A usual menstrual cycle begins with 2-6 days of vaginal blood loss, which is referred to as the “period” or “flow”, as the uterine lining is shed.²⁰ Whole period blood loss averages about 40 milliliters.²¹ From low levels during flow, estrogen rises to a mid-cycle peak over 9-20 days. Next, a pituitary Luteinizing Hormone (LH) peak triggers the release of an egg, which is referred to as ovulation. After ovulation, progesterone production rises steeply while estrogen decreases minimally until both decrease at the next period.²² The luteal, also known as post-ovulation, phase normally lasts 10-14 days; however, ovulatory disturbances are common in most women.²³

¹⁹ The first period of a woman’s life.

²⁰ Society for Menstrual Cycle Research.

²¹ L. Hallberg, A.M. Hogdahl, L. Nillson, and G. Rybo, “Menstrual Blood Loss—A Population Study. Variations at Different Ages and Attempts to Define Normality,” *Acta Obstetrics and Gynecology Scandinavia* 45 (1966), 320-351.

²² H.K. Nielson, K. Brixen, R. Bouillon, and L. Mosekilde, “Changes in Biochemical Markers of Osteoblastic Activity during the Menstrual Cycle,” *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* 70 (1990), 1431-1437..

²³ Jennifer Bedford, Jerilyn Prior, and Susan Barr, “A Prospective Exploration of Cognitive Dietary Restraint, Subclinical Ovulatory Disturbances, Cortisol and Change in Bone Density over Two Years in Healthy Young Women,” *JCEM* 95 (2010), 3291-3299.

Menarche, or the first menstruation period, is one of the last pubertal changes a girl experiences. Menarche can occur as early as age 8 and as late as age 17.²⁴ The development of full reproductive maturity can take up to several years after a girl has her first menstrual cycle. The average age of menarche in both the United States and Europe is about 12.5 years, and has not changed in 50 years; however, African American girls menstruate about six months earlier than European American girls.²⁵

²⁴ Paula J. Adams Hilliard, "Menstruation in Young Girls: A Clinical Perspective," *Health Care for Women International* 99 no.4 (2002), 655-662.

²⁵ Sandra Steingraber, "The Falling Age of Puberty in U.S. Girls: What We Know, What We Need to Know," (San Francisco, California: Breast Cancer Fund, 2007).

IDEOLOGIES OF MENSTRUATION IN AMERICAN TRADITIONS: THE TABOO AND THE LIBERATING

Why have women's bodies become a battleground? The simple answer is because they present (or represent) a threat to culture and society. An ancient threat, believed by many to be the root of patriarchal oppression of women, concerns paternity and men's uncertainty about whether they have a genetic connection to the children they are raising. This threat has resulted in colonization: attempts to control women's bodies and to curtail women's freedom. However, it does not concern us here because it does not lead to stigmatizing women's bodies, although it certainly has led to stigmatization of women as adulterers and children as bastards, often with disastrous consequences. Today, in some parts of the world, women are still killed because they have been accused of adultery.²⁶

Not only does menstruation bring discomfort, thoughts of disgust, and embarrassment, it brings shame to the vagina and its surrounding areas, deeming them to be an unspeakable and unpleasant topic.²⁷ Through this section, one will see ways in which Americans view menstruation as a negative influence on female sexuality.

Shame on you, Vagina

Psychologists Deborah Schooler, L. Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether and Allison S. Caruthers examined the shaming of a woman's body through a study which attempted to liberate the shame which menstruation brings to a woman in relation to sexual decision-making. "Because menstruation and sexual activity often share the same intimate location on women's bodies, shame regarding menstruation might influence a woman's general approach to her sexuality. Furthermore, girls are often socialized to

²⁶ Chrisler, 206.

²⁷ Deborah Schooler, L. Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether, and Allison S. Caruthers, "Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making," *Journal of Sex Research* 42 no. 4 (2005), 324.

connect menstruation with sexuality.”²⁸ In one study, women who reported more comfort with menstruation also reported more comfort with sexuality and were more likely to engage in sexual intercourse while menstruating.²⁹ In addition to this, women who reported more shame about menstruation also reported engaging in less sexual activity overall; moreover, if they were sexually active, they reported engaging in more sexual risk-taking, such as unprotected sex.³⁰ Evidence also shows that women who perceive their vaginas as dirty, smelly, and shameful reported lower levels of sexual participation and enjoyment of sexual activity.³¹

Through these findings, one can see how negative attitudes about one’s vagina and menstruation, in particular, can diminish a woman’s ability to take pleasure not only in her body and sexual experiences, but her overall confidence as well, whether she is currently menstruating or not. This can lead to toxic projections of a woman’s body, such as a correspondence with “dominant discourses surrounding female sexuality, which characterize women’s bodies not as sites of personal pleasure, but as objects of male desire.”³² Menstrual shame, I assert, is connected to bodily shame, more specifically genital shame, and therefore can be toxic to one’s sexuality. This ultimately leads to her partner finding her undesirable, thus exacerbated toxic shame. Arguably, these limiting definitions of female sexuality make it difficult for young women to make safe and

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ John Rempell and Barbara Baumgartner, “The Relationship between Attitudes towards Menstruation and Sexual Attitudes, Desires, and Behavior in Women,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 32 no. 2 (2003), 155-163.

³⁰ Schooler et al., 324.

³¹ Rhonda K. Reinholtz and Charlene L. Muehlenhard, “Genital Perceptions and Sexual Activity in a College Population,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 32 no. 2 (1995), 155-165.

³² Schooler et al., 324.

proactive sexual decisions for their own bodies. Menstruation shaming, therefore, leads to and coincides with sexual shaming. Menstrual and genital shame are also linked with decreased sexual experience, for women who are ashamed of their vaginas do not want to engage in conversations about their “hushed” body parts. This leads to an increase in sexual risk-taking and reduced sexual pleasure.³³ “This suggests that shame, and menstrual and body shame specifically, may play an important role in the larger complex of women’s sexual socialization.”³⁴

Using Objectification theory, Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, argue that the cultural ramifications of sexual objectification functions to socialize girls and women to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated based on appearance. This particular theory suggests that females come to internalize an objectifying observer’s perspective on their own bodies, thus becoming preoccupied with their own physical appearance as a way of anticipating and controlling their treatment in the world—an effect termed “self-objectification.” More than any other body function, menstruation must be kept a deep, dark secret in a sexually objectifying society.³⁵

In a study conducted by Tomi-Ann Roberts, the examination of the extent to which women self-objectify is associated with more negative attitudes towards menstruation is questioned. Roberts predicted that women who endorse more self-objectified views of their bodies would have more negative attitudes and emotions, such

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Tomi-Ann Roberts and Barbara Fredrickson, "Female Trouble: The Menstrual Self-Evaluation Scale and Women's Self-Objectification," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2004), 22.

as disgust and shame, towards menstruation.³⁶ Roberts initially found what she predicted; women who tend to participate more in self-objectifying practices that prioritize their bodies' physical appearance have more negative attitudes towards menstrual cycles. In addition to this, women who have more body shame were more likely to engage in more negative emotions such as disgust toward their own menstrual periods.³⁷ Therefore, it can be argued that women are ultimately ashamed of their menstrual cycles because they are ashamed of their bodies and the natural functions it produces. "The results of this study suggest that women's practices of self-objectification involved a kind of psychic distancing from their physical bodies. That is, regardless of their age, the more women internalize sexually objectifying standards on their bodies the more they appear to hold negative attitudes and emotions toward one of their bodies' most obviously physical functions: menstruation."³⁸ Roberts also believes that maybe the practices of feminine hygiene such as sanitizing, deodorizing, and hiding of menstrual-related products, lead to increased self-objectification.³⁹ Therefore, it is crucial to note that the suppressing or shaming of one's menstruation can lead to self-objectification in women. This is something that is extremely harmful for self-esteem and is another reason why I argue that perceptions of menstrual cycles should be liberated.

³⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

³⁷ Ibid., 24.

³⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁹ Ibid.

The Coming Out of Menstruation as a Form of Sexuality

Viewing a woman's period as a site of sexuality instead of shame, repression, and unhygienic practice is arguably one of the ways in which menstruation can be viewed in light of liberation. Child and adolescent psychotherapist, Kate Donmall believes that "it may be that female sexuality, like the menstrual blood with which it is so intimately linked, is seen as dirty, messy, uncontrollable, in keeping with Freud's belief in the dark complexity of female sexuality."⁴⁰ Donmall also uses an example of a young teen describing her menstrual cycle. "Laura tells herself when she is menstruating to 'make sure you always sit so it was in a nice straight line.'"⁴¹ This image not only portrays her feminine product as being in the correct position, but also her vagina. Donmall argues that this is her sexuality—neat and under control. "It's a 'nice' straight line, a word she later uses to describe her ideals of womanhood. . . She goes on to describe menstruation as the opposite to these ideals and as something we link to our genitals."⁴²

Both sexuality and menstruation are related to the same bodily region—the genitals. "Thus, they [the genitals] are likely to be psychologically linked merely by virtue of their association with the same physiological structures. However, the bond may run deeper. Menstruation is a distinctive sign of both reproductive potential and sexual maturity. Both sexuality and menstruation are connected with the presence (or absence) of fertility and childbirth."⁴³ As a result of the association between menstruation and

⁴⁰ Kate Donmall, "What it Means to Bleed: An Exploration of Young Women's Experiences of Menarche and Menstruation," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 29 no. 2 (2013), 212.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rempel and Baumgartner, 155.

sexual identity, psychologists John Rempel and Barbara Baumgartner believe women who develop negative attitudes and reactions to themselves as sexual beings or to their bodies as sexual instruments may also develop correspondingly negative reactions to menstruation.⁴⁴ “For example, women who have learned that sexuality is a source of embarrassment and shame may have similar reactions towards menstruation. Similarly, if women have been taught to associate menstruation with dirtiness or impurity, they may be more inclined to cast sexual activity in the same negative light.”⁴⁵

Sadly this results in a rejection of menstruation. Many young women long to “make it stop,” as menstruation’s reminder of the conflicts of sexuality are too much. I argue that this can be linked not only to female masochism, a psychic refusal to accept menstruation, or to long for menstruation to cease, but also to Freud’s idea of anaesthetic female sexuality.

This anaesthesia may become permanent if the clitoridal zone refuses to abandon its excitability, an event for which the way is prepared precisely by an extensive activity of that zone in childhood. Anaesthesia in women, as it is well known, is often only apparent and local. They are anaesthetic at the vaginal orifice but are by no means incapable of excitement originating in the clitoris or other zones. Alongside these erotogenic determinants of anaesthesia must also be set the psychical determinants, which equally arise from repression.⁴⁶

Though Freud was not talking about menstruation explicitly, I challenge any scholar to read these particular words through the lenses of one studying menstrual repression.

Sexual repression and menstrual repression, I argue, are linked and can become extremely hazardous to any woman’s appreciation and liberation of her body. Learning

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 155-56.

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, translated by James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965) 87.

that a menstrual cycle is something that is not dirty or demeaning, but something that is natural and should be celebrated will help diminish these negative connotations, and in turn, will help with the acceptance of menstruation as something that is a beautiful normative.

Donmall believes female masochism and the refusal to accept femininity is linked to passivity and pain. “The discomfort and pain, and the guilt induced by repressed and potential incestuous desires, cause the woman to draw back from the feminine erotic function or to hide her sexuality and the menstruation that may symbolize it.”⁴⁷ Being female is most commonly associated with pain and repression. Menstrual cycles, childbirth, suppressing undergarments, plucking and waxing of facial hair are all associated with being a woman and they are all linked with this notion of pain. “We might consider how the ‘mess’ of menstruation may awaken unconsciously the sadistic concept of coitus and thus a fear of sexuality, or reawaken feelings of confusion and shame in relation to the mess of infantile incontinence. . . This offers another explanation for the intimate connection between menstruation, mess, and shame.”⁴⁸ Menstruation should not be connected with “mess” and “shame”, but rather with the beauty of creation: the creation of a new woman, the creation of a new life, and the creation of a new liberation.

In the study conducted by Rempel and Baumgartner, the finding that sexual activity during menstruation is related to a greater desire for unconventional sexual activities is informative not only about the nature of sexual desire, but also about the way in which menstruation is regarded and can potentially be liberated. Women who have had

⁴⁷ Donmall, 213.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

sexual relations during their period appear to enjoy a wider range of sexually stimulating acts, particularly acts that many might regard as shocking (e.g., viewing or performing in live sex shows, group sex, and arousal through role play).⁴⁹ “Thus, it seems that women who have engaged in menstrual sex not only experience greater sexual desire, but they are also uniquely aroused by sexual acts that push the boundaries of social convention. . . . Thus, in general, these results suggest that women who express themselves sexually during their menstrual period may be more willing to challenge and transcend traditional notions of acceptable female sexual behavior.”⁵⁰ Comfort with menstruation and comfort with personal sexuality is believed by Rempel and Baumgartner to involve both attitudinal and evaluative responses. “Consequently, there was the possibility that they were correlated because they are both manifestations of a more liberal attitude of openness and comfort with issues that are often considered taboo.”⁵¹ Overall, the acceptance of liberal values was positively associated with greater comfort with menstruation. I argue that having an open mind about the liberation of the menstrual cycle can lead to being open and liberated in one’s sexuality.

Tuck Away the Tampon: Feminine Hygiene Product Taboo

When examining the use and sale of feminine hygiene products, society tends to keep this a hushed and modest subject as well. Maxi pad and tampon commercials and ads contribute to this taboo by promoting secrecy through their use of allegorical images such as flowers and hearts. They contribute to stigmatizing menstruation by placing

⁴⁹ Rempel and Baumgartner, 162.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 161.

emphasis on being clean, fresh, and avoiding embarrassment. Most ads actually use blue liquid, rather than red or brown, to show the products' absorption functions and hide its actual use.⁵² "The term 'feminine hygiene' itself suggests that there is something dirty about women, and Kotex now markets a new 'crinkle-free' wrapper, so that other women in public restrooms will not know that someone is unwrapping one of their products."⁵³

Karen Houppert, the author of *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo*, reports that even though large-scale national studies about American attitudes toward menstruation are being conducted by the menstrual products industry, these companies are not necessarily sharing their findings. "These studies are of a competitive nature, but the information isn't something we'd want to make public."⁵⁴ It is noted that Procter & Gamble, the largest company within the tampon and sanitary pad market, solicits this kind of information as part of its standard marketing research; however, it is seen that not even the menstrual product market wants to talk about the taboo of periods. However, there is one exception. In the paragraph below, it is seen that menstruation has a negative connotation amongst Americans. Seeing that there are no other examples of surveys such as these that have been released by feminine product companies since 1981, it is safe to say these said companies are hiding behind the menstrual taboo as well.

In 1981, Tampax shared a copy of a survey with the Society of Menstrual Cycle Research.⁵⁵ In April and May of 1981, fifty trained researchers conducted fifteen minute phone interviews with more than a thousand men and women across the United States.

⁵² Chrisler, 203.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Houppert, 5-6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

The study included people of all ages, education levels, income levels, and ethnic backgrounds. It was discovered that men and women had similar beliefs about menstruation, sharing an overall attitude that the researchers characterized as “negative” and an understanding of menstruation that was “confused.” More than one-quarter thought that women could not function normally at work while menstruating, with eight percent saying that women should make an effort to stay away from others when they are on their menstrual cycle. Thirty-five percent said they thought menstruation affected a woman’s ability to think, while thirty percent thought that women should cut down their physical activities while menstruating. Additionally, forty-nine percent said that women had a different scent at the time, and twenty-seven percent said menstruating women looked differently. Half of those polled thought women should not have sexual intercourse during their menstrual cycle and twenty-two percent believed swimming while bleeding was harmful to others. Two-thirds of those surveyed said that women should not mention their menstrual cycle and more than one-third thought that women should conceal the fact that they are menstruating from their families, which included hiding their feminine products. Men, however, were more likely than women to talk openly about periods. Thirty-one percent of the women surveyed reported not knowing what menstruation was the first time it happened to time, and forty-three percent of the women had negative responses to their first period, saying they felt scared, confused, terrible, panicky, or ill.⁵⁶

A study conducted by psychologist Joan Chrisler, details that menstrual hygiene supplies were always placed in the rear of the three major drugstore chains they investigated—“where people who were not looking for them would be less likely to

⁵⁶ Ibid., 6-7.

encounter them.”⁵⁷ “The signs in the aisle were euphemistic (e.g., ‘Personal Care’), and in one store, the aisle sign read ‘clean, revitalize, cleansing, fresh.’ The uninitiated might expect to find soap and detergent in an aisle marked that way, but the shelves contained tampons, pads, breastfeeding supplies, and douching supplies.”⁵⁸ The underlying message that these ads and signs are giving women is that without their products, women are dirty, stagnant, and even filthy. Therefore, I argue that the terminology of “feminine hygiene products” should be revamped and renamed. The understanding of tampons, pads, and menstrual cups as something that is disgusting, dirty, and unhygienic should be dissipated among both young and mature women alike. Therefore, I argue that products such as these should be simply be called “feminine products” because there is nothing unhygienic about the menstruation process or vaginal care in general.

Liberation of the Menstrual Cycle

In Western culture, it is reported that girls have mixed, but mostly negative, feelings about menstruation; they see it as a sign of growing up, but are embarrassed about it.⁵⁹ This is an important, influential time in a young woman’s life where liberation of the ideas concerning the menstrual cycle is especially important. Promoting self-care and confidence has proven to provide more positive attitudes towards appreciating being a woman, in addition to promoting enjoyment of her sexual to experiences.⁶⁰ According

⁵⁷ Chrisler, 203.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Margaret L. Stubbs, “Cultural Perceptions and Practices Around Menarche and Adolescent Menstruation in the United States,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1135 (2008), 58-66.

⁶⁰M. McPherson and L. Korfine, “Menstruation Across Time: Menarche, Menstrual Attitudes, Experiences, and Behaviors,” *Women’s Health Issues* 14 (2004), 193-2004.

to Janet Lee, a researcher who conducted a study of mothers and daughters at the time of menarche, supportive, engaged mothers who react in a matter-of-fact way can act as a buffer towards negative cultural stereotypes.⁶¹

A century ago, girls reached menarche approximately two to four years later in life than girls today. The number of pregnancies was higher in the 19th century compared to the 20th and 21st centuries; therefore, the number of menstruations in life was less than in today's western society. Moreover, it is crucial to note that maturity has become more involved with physical and sexual development than with reproduction and motherhood; therefore, it may be puzzling for some girls to receive menarche at an average age of twelve, when, in western society, they, on average, become mothers at the age of twenty-eight. The rapidly increasing gap between menarche and motherhood makes menstruation a symbol not of motherhood, but sexuality; this shapes the perspective one has about the meaning of one's genitals.⁶² Since a girl's self-esteem is at its most vulnerable during puberty, it is crucial to talk about menstruation liberation at a young age. Teaching a young woman that her period is nothing to be ashamed of is imperative during these early cycles of menstruation. It is necessary to teach a young woman that getting her first period is not dirty, but a normal feature of being a woman, of which she should be proud.

What does liberation look like? Liberation of the menstrual cycle means to take a step back from the silencing one of the biological features of being a woman. Liberation is the detachment of the taboos and the underlying dirtiness of what it means to menstruate; a bodily function that cannot be helped should not force a woman into special

⁶¹ Janet Lee, "A Kotex Smile: Mothers and Daughters at Menarche," *Journal of Family Issues* 29 no. 10 (2008), 1325-1347.

⁶² Gun Rembeck, Margareta Möller, and Ronny Gunnarsson. "Attitudes and Feelings Towards Menstruation and Womanhood in Girls at Menarche," *Acta Pædiatrica*. 95, no. 6, (2006), 707-714.

places away from others in society, mentally or physically. Liberation of the menstrual cycle promotes positive attitudes towards menstruation that advocates for the beauty of life for a woman. Liberation of the menstrual cycle is not hiding behind “crinkle free” wrappers or back-wall displays in a drug store. Liberation of the menstrual cycle encourages talk about bleeding without underlying embarrassment. And most importantly, liberation of the menstrual cycle generates pride in what it means to be a woman.

MENSTRUATION AND RELIGIOSITY

Nearly every fertile woman experiences a period almost a quarter of her life, yet some religious traditions contain rules and rituals that mark the woman as unclean or dangerous, even though she has no control over this bodily function. “Religion has long been considered an important influence on sexuality, defining the normative and penalizing the deviant.”⁶³ I assert that we take this a bit further as we use this liberation of the menstrual cycle to define the deviant and revamp the understanding of the normative.

Religious Taboos in Orthodox Jewish Law and Islam

As seen in some Jewish traditions, *Halakha*, the Jewish code of law, articulates strict rules concerning various aspects of the daily lives of some Jews, including their sexual lives. *Niddah*⁶⁴ is the Hebrew term describing a woman during menstruation. This term is also used to describe a woman who has menstruated and has not yet completed the requirement of immersion in a *mikveh* (the ritual cleansing bath). According to ritual, following these two weeks—from the beginning of the menstruation period until the end of the cleansing—a woman is considered unclean. In Leviticus 15,⁶⁵ it is also prohibited to have sexual intercourse with a *niddah*.

Two important aspects of the *niddah* regulations ban male-female contact and is enforced prior to the beginning of the menstrual flow itself. Secondly, male-female interaction of any type is related not only to bleeding that is the result of the normal

⁶³ Mark A. Guterman, "Observance of the Laws of Family Purity in Modern-Orthodox Judaism," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 37, no. 2 (2008): 341.

⁶⁴ Otherwise noted as *nidah*.

⁶⁵ All Hebrew Scriptures will be taken from the Common English Bible unless otherwise noted.

menstrual cycle, but to any type of vaginal bleeding, whether it be related to menstruation or health problems. If a woman finds a stain that she is unsure about, she is advised to consult a religious authority, such as a rabbi or elder, for evaluation. Whether the cause is of the uterine or vaginal bleeding, there must be a seven-day period of abstinence after the last day in which blood was seen.⁶⁶

According to Leviticus 15,⁶⁷ it is strictly forbidden to have any physical contact between a male and a female during her time of menstruation and the week thereafter. This includes sharing objects between each other, such as a bed, food, or utensils, and even sitting together on the same cushion of a couch.⁶⁸ The origin of these “Laws of Family Purity” is that menstrual blood is considered ritually unclean. The source for these laws is found in Leviticus 18:19, “You must not approach a woman for sexual contact during her menstrual uncleanness.” “All of these verses explicitly state that one may not

⁶⁶ E.M. Whelan, "Attitudes toward Menstruation," *Studies in Family Planning* 6, no. 4 (1975), 107.

⁶⁷ 19 Whenever a woman has a discharge of blood that is her normal bodily discharge, she will be unclean due to her menstruation for seven days. Anyone who touches her will be unclean until evening. 20 Anything on which she lies or sits during her menstruation will be unclean. 21 Anyone who touches her bed must wash their clothes, bathe in water, and will be unclean until evening. 22 Anyone who touches anything on which she has sat must wash their clothes, bathe in water, and will be unclean until evening. 23 Whenever anyone touches something—whether it was on the bed or where she has been sitting—they will be unclean until evening. 24 If a man has sexual intercourse with her and her menstruation gets on him, he will be unclean for seven days. Any bed he lies on will be unclean. 25 Whenever a woman has a bloody discharge for a long time, which is not during her menstrual period, or whenever she has a discharge beyond her menstrual period, the duration of her unclean discharge will be like the period of her menstruation; she will be unclean. 26 Any bed she lies on during the discharge should be treated like the bed she uses during her menstruation; and any object she sits on will be unclean, as during her menstruation. 27 Anyone who touches these things will be unclean. They must wash their clothes, bathe in water, and will be unclean until evening. 28 When the woman is cleansed of her discharge, she will count off seven days; after that, she will be clean again. 29 On the eighth day she will take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest at the meeting tent’s entrance. 30 The priest will perform a purification offering with one and an entirely burned offering with the other. In this way, the priest will make reconciliation for her before the Lord because of her unclean discharge. 31 You must separate the Israelites from their uncleanness so that they don’t die on account of it, by making my dwelling unclean, which is in their midst. 32 This concludes the Instruction concerning those with discharges: men with emissions of semen that make them unclean, 33 women during their menstruation, men or women with discharges, and men who have had sexual intercourse with an unclean woman [Leviticus 15: 19-32 (CEB)].

⁶⁸ Mark Guterman, Payal Mehta, and Margaret Gibbs. “Menstrual Taboos Among Major Religions,” *The Internet Journal of World Health and Societal Politics* 5 no. 2 (2007), 1-2.

have intercourse with the forbidden. The fact that the nineteenth verse mentions ‘approach’, as opposed to actually having intercourse is the reasoning behind these menstrual laws.”⁶⁹ The laws of family purity are only required with a man’s own wife, any form of physical contact with pleasurable intent is prohibited i.e., holding hands, hugging and kissing.⁷⁰

Brides do not immerse in the *mikveh* until they are intended to be married; therefore, all unmarried woman are presumed to be in a state of *niddah*. Moreover, according to Jewish purity laws, every woman who has had her first period is not allowed to be touched by another male. Additional restrictions are put on married women while she is a *niddah*. These taboos include playing games and sports together, directly handling or receiving objects—they must be placed down on a surface, and then may be picked up by the spouse—and eating together from the same plate i.e., food must be served out of separated dishes and containers.⁷¹

Historically speaking, physical danger and disgust were used as mechanisms to enforce compliance with these laws among the Jews in the Middle Ages, according to psychologists Mark Guterman, Payal Mehta, and Margaret Gibbs. “When a woman was menstruating, she was seen as a physical and spiritual danger to all men.”⁷² Nahmanides, a Jewish Rabbi of the time, states that her breath is harmful, and her gaze is detrimental.⁷³ A woman was instructed not to walk between two men because if she did so, at the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

beginning of her menstrual cycle, she would cause detriments between the two of them, and if she did so at the end of her cycle, she would cause one of them to die.⁷⁴ This shows the great danger that was believed to be caused by a woman who is menstruating. The danger was believed not simply in the blood, but even in the atmosphere around her. “Additionally, a woman is instructed to be careful when cutting her toenails during her menses, for fear that her toenail clippings would spread infection to anyone who stepped on them.”⁷⁵

Jewish sociologists Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon conducted interviews with Orthodox Jewish women. During these said interviews, several observations were made. Many of the interviewees found *niddah* to be “particularly difficult,” as compared to other religious rituals. One woman described her difficulty with *niddah* as, “My needs for being touched are not just sexual; they’re human.”⁷⁶ Hartman and Marmon found that there was a lack of distinction between sexual and platonic touching, causing much controversy amongst Jews, and in fact, some Jews have referred to the laws of *niddah* as “primitive blood taboos.”⁷⁷ Another woman found the laws “dehumanizing” in that they disregarded her emotional needs, while another woman described her “intense frustration and inner turmoil” and felt “bound inextricably” to a ritual which caused her so much “personal torment.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Jonah Steinberg, “From ‘Pot of Filth’ to a ‘Hedge of Roses’ (and Back): Changing Theorizations of Menstruation in Judaism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13 no. 2 (1997), 5-26.

⁷⁵ Guterman et al., 2.

⁷⁶ Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon, “Lived Regulations Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women,” *Sex & Society* 18, no. 3 (2004), 402.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Of the American Jewish population of 5.2 million adults and children, 46% belong to a synagogue. Among those who belong to a synagogue, 22% are Orthodox; therefore over 526,000 Jews in America are exposed to these Laws of Family Purity. In a study of Modern-Orthodox Jewish couples, it was discovered that many laws were being broken. This study also found that older congregants were more likely to break the laws than younger ones.⁷⁹ Based on the analysis of this study, it was concluded that, despite the prohibitions, nearly every participant reported transgressing at least once during the taboo period.⁸⁰

This data shows that religious laws and rituals are starting to dissipate even amongst the strictest cultures within American society. Change is starting to take place. “Many of the interviewees did ‘not see the logic in [*niddah*],’ and stated that their lives ‘would’ve been much better without it.’”⁸¹

Mark Guterman, a Jewish psychologist, speaks about this subject on a more personal level:

Growing up in a U.S. Orthodox Jewish community is a unique experience. I attended separate, same-sex schools, and had little contact with members of the opposite sex. For as long as I can remember, I was taught that girls above the age of twelve (i.e., girls who have had their first menstrual period) were not allowed to be touched by boys. Only once engaged was I taught strict rules that govern the sexual lives of observant Jews.⁸²

When examining Guterman’s words, I believe it is crucial to note the harshness of what is being taught here. Girls are being told that their bodies are not to be touched by boys because they are “unclean”. Guterman, being male, is making a claim that even men

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ M.A. Guterman, 344.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Guterman et al., 2.

do not quite understand the purpose of these laws fully. However, what is not being portrayed implicitly is that boys should not touch girls because their bodies are precious entities that should not be taken advantage of by anyone. Shaming one because she has “become a woman” is not the way to promote self-confidence and self-appreciation. This may lead to promotion of females as an entity of property, something that can be claimed, taken advantage of, and used. Men and women alike need to respect the female body, for her body means something greater than a vessel used for male pleasure. Therefore, I claim, a girl should not let a male take advantage of her because she has a high self worth, not because she is “unclean”.

Guterman goes on to say,

Jewish observance includes observance of the laws of family purity. It was certainly an eye-opening experience to learn about the rules (such as restrictions on passing objects between each other, eating directly from one’s wife’s leftovers, smelling her perfume, etc.). Only at the end of the *Niddah* period, after the ritual bath, are spouses permitted to touch each other, once again. Learning about these regulations has led to my interest and desire to conduct research in this area.⁸³

Girls who have been raised in these traditions may be led to accepting them without reasoning. This teaches a very important lesson within itself—traditions may be accepted without questioning, adaptations to taboos may be forced onto future generations without sound teaching, and girls’ bodies may be shamed when they have no control over what is happening to them.

Ways in which menstrual taboos can be liberated can be seen through the eyes of feminist theologians such as Judith Romney Wegner. She believes the priestly regulation of women who are menstruating as seen in Leviticus 15 may be one of the most

⁸³ Ibid.

misconstrued passages in the Torah.⁸⁴ “Many people erroneously confuse the notion that menstruation causes ‘impurity’ or ‘pollution’ with the idea that the menstrual flow itself is unclean. That misperception probably stems from a misguided notion that everything connected with sexuality is ‘sinful’ and hence ‘dirty.’”⁸⁵ Wegner goes on to challenge her readers to think of menstruation in light of a woman’s sexuality. She believes this biblical Israelite religion sees sexual relations within marriage as among the highest, purest, and holiest of human activities. “God’s first commandment was: ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’⁸⁶ Nothing connected with the divinely created sexual-reproductive function could be characterized as ‘dirty’.”⁸⁷ In addition to this, contemporary sources view menstruation and the laws surrounding it as a blessing. Modern orthodoxy stresses *attention*, *affection*, and *companionship* between couples. “It is thought [by modern orthodoxy] that following these laws will cause the husband to view his wife as an equal human being, as opposed to a sexual object.”⁸⁸

In Islam, *Haidh* is the type of blood that is discharged from the womb of a woman every month.⁸⁹ There are several different categories of *Ha’iz* (menstruating women). The first is *Mubtadi’ah*, which is literally translated as a “beginner”. In the present context, it means a girl who sees menstruation for the first time. The second is *Zatu ‘I-*

⁸⁴ Judith Romeny Wegner, “Leviticus,” In *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe [pp. 40-48] (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 44.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ See Genesis 1:28.

⁸⁷ Wegner, 44.

⁸⁸ Guterman et al., 2.

⁸⁹ Batul S. Arastu, *Al-Islam.Org*. 2003. “Women’s Issues Made Simple,” <https://www.al-islam.org/womens-issues-made-simple-batul-s-arastu/haidh-menstruation-or-period> (last accessed February 19, 2017).

'*adah*, which describes as a woman who has menstruation regularly at a fixed time or for a fixed number of days or both. Thirdly, a *Muztaribah* is a woman who does not have her periods with regularity.⁹⁰

Menstruating women are considered “impure” and are to be avoided by men. These laws are derived from the Qur’an 2:222, which states, “They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say it is an illness so let women alone at such times and go not into them til they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you.”

Muslim culture does not consider a menstruating woman to possess any kind of contagious uncleanness or disease; however, the Islamic law treats menstruation as impure for religious functions only.⁹¹ There are two main prohibitions placed upon the menstruating woman. First, she is not to enter into the mosque or any shrine. Secondly, she may not pray or fast during Ramadan while she is menstruating. In fact, the fasting of Ramadan has proven to hold certain health risks to women, including irregular menstrual cycles.⁹² She must also not touch the Qur’an or even recite its contents. She is not allowed to have sexual intercourse for seven full days, which begins when the bleeding starts. Finally, she is exempted from rituals such as daily prayers and fasting, although

⁹⁰ Sayyid M. Rizvi, *Al-Islam.Org*. 2003. “The Ritual Ablutions for Women,” <https://www.al-islam.org/the-ritual-ablutions-for-women-sayyid-muhammad-rizvi/introduction> (last accessed February 19, 2017).

⁹¹ Sherif Muhammad Abdel Azeem, *Islam-The Modern Religion*, 1995. “Women in Islam verses Women in Judaeo-Christian Tradition: The Myth and the Reality,” http://www.themodernreligion.com/women/w_comparison_full.htm (last accessed February 18, 2017).

⁹² Mahnaz Yavangi, Mohammad Ali Amirzargar, Nasibeh Amirzargar, and Maryam Dadashpour, "Does Ramadan Fasting have any Effects on Menstrual Cycles?" *Iranian Journal of Reproductive Medicine* 11, no. 2 (2013): 145-50.

she is not given the option of performing these rituals, even if she wants to.⁹³ In addition, the woman must complete a ritual washing before she becomes clean again. Following this bathing, she is able to perform prayers, fasting, and is allowed to enter the mosque and other shrines.⁹⁴

After a lengthy discussion of the Islamic laws of purity, Ze'ev Maghen concludes, "The 'problem' with menstruating women (reflected in the restrictions placed upon certain of their activities) is confined to the ritually threatening properties of their menstrual blood per se."⁹⁵ Guterman et al. report an Islamic woman's experience with these practices.

When I was little, and lived in Iran, we had traveled to a village north of Tehran. My parents invited the villagers to eat with us. However, their teenage daughter was not allowed to have dinner with us. My parents and I were surprised; we later found out that because she had her period, she was viewed as 'unclean' and 'najeste' (in Farsi, this refers to an object or person who will contaminate you). It was believed that she would contaminate the dishes, silverware, food, etc. Overall, even though my mother tried to educate me, in the right way, about the menstruation process, I still recall feeling 'dirty' and 'damaged' when I had my first period. I remember that the religious preachings made me feel very ashamed about both my body, and this normal experience, as I went through the process.⁹⁶

This example asserts that no matter how and what a young woman is taught about her body, there is still a little bit of underlying shame that comes with the social taboos of menstruation. Teaching young women that these rituals are not put into place in order to shame one's body is a way in which menstrual liberation can be utilized in light of this specific example.

⁹³ Ze'ev Maghen, "Close Encounters: Some Preliminary Observations on the Transmission of Impurity in Early Sunni Jurisprudence," *Islamic Law and Society* 6 no. 3 (1999), 349.

⁹⁴ Azeem.

⁹⁵ Maghen, 381.

⁹⁶ Guterman et al., 3

However, it is believed by those within the Islamic culture that a woman on her period is not excluded from living her every day life among others. In a story told by S.M. Rizvi, it is concluded that the uncleanness of menstrual blood in no way prevents a woman from living a normal life among her family and friends.

A person asked Imam ja'far as Sadiq (peace be upon him) about a woman who gives water to a man while she is in her monthly period. The Imam said, "One of the wives of the Prophet (upon whom be peace) was pouring water on him and serving him drink while she was in her monthly period." In another tradition, Im-am Muhammad al Baqir (peace be upon him) narrates that the Prophet (upon whom be peace) said to one of his wives, "Serve me a drink." She said, "I am in my monthly period." The Prophet said, "Is your menstruation in your hand?!" These two narrations are sufficient to show that the impurity of menstruation does not prevent a woman from living a normal life with her family and friends.⁹⁷

On the other hand, there are certain acts of worship in Islam which are so sacred that a Muslim, whether man or woman, cannot perform them unless he or she has certain qualifications. It is only in relation to these acts that women who are on their period, just as *Junub* men, are forbidden from performing them.⁹⁸ Seeing there are laws of ritual for male uncleanness, just as there are laws for female uncleanness, I argue that this promotes gender equality, for both genders have religious duties to perform in order to prepare themselves for worship. (Hebrew Scriptures also have laws set into place for both males and females. Leviticus 15:19-24 treats menstrual pollution like that caused by other genital discharges, whether occurring in males⁹⁹ or in females.¹⁰⁰ According to a feminist theologian, "Rules for symbolic purification by ritual immersion and for bringing an

⁹⁷ Rizvi.

⁹⁸ *Junub* is an Islamic term meaning ritually impure due to sexual intercourse or seminal discharge. A person in such a state needs to bathe in order to become ritually pure and be able to perform his prayers.

⁹⁹ See Leviticus 15:2-12.

¹⁰⁰ See Leviticus 15: 25-27.

offering to expiate the pollution are prescribed for men and women alike”¹⁰¹). The acts as a menstruating woman may not perform include:

- 1) Touching the writings of the Qur'an, the names and attributes of Allah, the names of the Prophet, the Imams and Fatimah.
- 2) Reciting those verses of the Qur'an in which *sa-jdah* (prostration) is *wajib*, i.e., verse 15 of chapter 32; verse 37 of chapter 41; verse 62 of chapter 53; and verse 19 of chapter 96. It is better not to recite even a single verse from these chapters.
- 3) Staying or even entering in a mosque.
- 4) Putting something in a mosque even if she is standing outside. But she may take out something from it provided she does not enter it.
- 5) A woman who is in her periods is excused from *salat* (prayers) because she does not have an important qualification for *salat*, i.e., *taharat* (cleanliness).
- 6) Likewise a *ha'iz* woman is excused from fasting; but in this case, she has to fast after the month of Ramadan.¹⁰²

Many Islamic women use a thick type of “sanitary napkin” during menses due to the religious requirement that even disposable products be washed before disposal.

Wearing a “sanitary napkin” can cause mental stress.¹⁰³ Therefore, it can be seen that religious laws concerning what and how a woman should handle her period can cause unnecessary mental stressors.

In looking at religious taboos and traditions as a whole, this is where the importance of liberation of the menstrual cycle comes into play. Education on what it means to menstruate is very crucial for males and females. Learning how to educate men and women on traditions and ideals of the menstrual cycle may lead to girls and women respecting the traditions at hand, but will promote critical thinking and acceptance of not

¹⁰¹ Wegner, 44.

¹⁰² Rizvi.

¹⁰³ Nazirah G, Mohamed, Nurdiana Z. Abidin, Kim S. Law, Mika Abe, Megumi Suzuki, Ahmad M Che Mu hamed, and Rabindarjeet Singh, “The Effect of Wearing Sanitary Napkins of Different Thicknesses on Physiological and Psychological Responses in Muslim Females,” *Journal of Physiological Anthropology* 33 no. 28 (2014), 2.

only of how they choose to treat their own bodies, but how they allow others to treat their bodies as well.

Neo-Paganism in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Previously, it has been seen that religious connotations about menstruation can be negative and harmful to a perception of a woman's body and the functions thereof. However, within the religious traditions of Neo-paganism of the twenty-first century, one can see the liberation of menstruation when it is described as something beautiful, unique, and sacred.

Neo-pagan religions are reconstructions of ancient abandoned belief systems that include, but are not limited to Celtic, Egyptian, Greek, Norse, and Roman traditions. Most Neo-pagan traditions practice offering menstrual blood back to the earth in order to promote a transition from a source of shame and impurity to now being regarded as a sacred process and a blissful state of being.¹⁰⁴ Rituals and celebrations from menarche and menopause are becoming more and more popular.¹⁰⁵ It is becoming easier to find rituals for menarche and menopause. It is believed by Asa West, a Neo-pagan who blogs about mental health, magic, and nature, that practices like ritual baths should mark the end of each month's cycle, but it is harder to find rituals that mark the beginning. "The moment when the cervix opens and the first blood emerges is significant—for example,

¹⁰⁴ Asa West, *Witches and Pagans*, 2006. "A Simple Ritual for Menstruation," <http://witchesandpagans.com/pagan-paths-blogs/this-dusty-earth/a-simple-ritual-for-menstruation.html> (last accessed February 19, 2017).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

the first day of a pregnant person's last period is used to calculate their due date—yet most of us mark it with little more than a hurriedly placed tampon or pad.”¹⁰⁶

West decided to design a ritual for the first day of menstruation. She believed that when designing this ritual, she wanted to make it simple. “I always feel sleepy and lethargic when my period starts, and the last thing I want to do is a complicated ritual with lots of props and lengthy prayers.”¹⁰⁷ West gives step-by-step instructions to celebrate the beginning of one's period. A menstrual cup or a biodegradable napkin, red wine or grape juice, a potted plant, if there is no access to land, and a chalice or cup is needed to engage in this ritual process. West states, “On the first day of your cycle, insert the cup or wear the napkin long enough to collect some blood. Pour the wine or grape juice into the chalice or cup. Take the blood and wine/grape juice out into your yard, the woods, or any outdoor area where you'll have some privacy. Alternately, sit down in front of the plant. Once you're settled, bury the napkin or pour the blood onto the earth. Then drink the wine or grape juice.”¹⁰⁸

West believes that one's menstrual cycle should be something that is liberated and celebrated. She encourages women to make the ritual she designed their own by adding silent meditations, reciting prayers or blessings, or doing anything the woman feels called to do. “The heart of the ritual is the simple exchange of life—giving fluids between you and the earth: giving your blood to the soil to help the plants grow, and taking in the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

grapes produced by that same soil. In performing this exchange, you're strengthening your connection with the earth and the ecosystems around you."¹⁰⁹

Neo-pagan first menstruation rituals are most often given titles such as *first blood celebrations*, *menarche rites*, *red parties*, *womanings*, *coming of age rituals*, and *first moon celebrations*. These said rituals are linked with ceremonies that include candles, pendants, easy-to-follow ritual scrolls, moon calendars, herbal teas, and menstrual goddesses. Other rituals are linked with the baking of a red cake, granting three wishes, and menarche parties.¹¹⁰

One of the menarche rituals is described in the following way:

Often a special altar is built with little goddess statues, seashells, red roses and other symbols of menstruation and womanhood. Sometimes the girl will choose a favorite childhood toy to throw into the fire, symbolizing the release of her child-like ways, and receives a special piece of jewelry as a token of her new role as a menstruating woman. The girl can also be tied together to her mother with rope or ribbon, representing the bond of mother and child. The maiden then wiggles free or is released by the grandmother and runs to a special place away from the party to sit in seclusion and reflect on her new role as a young woman. When she returns, the older women take time to recall their own first periods, share stories about the joys and pains of menstruation, offer advice regarding sex and sensuality and have many laughs and tears about being a woman. Gifts are given to the young maiden such as chocolate, jewelry, fancy clothes, and menstrual products. Parents sometimes offer the girl special privileges, such as a later curfew or permission to wear makeup or get a body piercing. After the ceremony is over, a great feast takes place with song and dance late into the night, followed by a slumber party with her closest friends.¹¹¹

In addition to this, most Neo-pagan religions believe that women should be honored for their harmless monthly blood and believe a woman's ability to carry life

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Michael Houseman, "Menstrual Slaps and First Blood Celebrations: Inference, Stimulation, and the Learning of Ritual," in *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. David Berliner and Ramon Sarro (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 38.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 38-39.

within themselves to be a miraculous thing.¹¹² “Many centuries ago, menstruating women were considered blessed. Menstrual blood, as believed by some, should serve purposes to purify, cleanse, and renew a woman as she prepares for higher spiritual accomplishments such as pregnancy.¹¹³ This is very different from the previous religious claims, which believe women should be purified and cleansed in order to rid herself from toxins associated with menstrual blood.

Some Neo-pagans of the twenty-first century believe in Ancient gods and goddesses. One which promotes liberation of femininity is the Great Goddess Mari. Her images are shown in three stages of the female life cycle: the premenstrual maiden, the fertile menstrual nymph, and the postmenopausal crone. Not only do some sects of Neo-paganism tend to honor the Triple Goddess of maiden (virginity), mother (fertility), and crone (wisdom), but they also honor the Horned God. These two deities are often viewed as being a sacred blend of the universe and the Divine.¹¹⁴

The Great Goddess Kali, who is found in Hindu traditions, is another example of female liberation celebrated by Neo-paganism today. It is believed that her menstrual blood is the life essence of humankind and all creation. It also is believed that Ancient Egyptian pharaohs became divine by ingesting the menstrual blood of the Goddess Isis. In addition to this, it is believed that the Great Goddess created people out of clay and brought them to life with her blood. She taught women to form clay dolls and smear them

¹¹² Laurel Alexander, *Natural Wellness Strategies for the Menstrual Years* (Chicago: Findhorn Press, 2013), 28.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

with menstrual blood. Women use this same ritual when seeking blessing to create new life.¹¹⁵

Another way to see liberation of the menstrual cycle through the lenses of neo-Paganism is to attend to a traditional moon cycle ritual that celebrates the menstrual cycle that has just been completed and promote confidence in what it means to be a woman.

Your monthly bleed has finished, and you are now in the Maiden aspect of your Goddess energy. At this time, you are energetically reborn and able to expand and direct your attention to the outside world. This, for many women, is the time of the new moon, when you are mentally focused, rational, and practical. Celebrate this time as one where you can synthesize new ideas into a workable whole. As your estrogen rises, this is an easy time to feel courageous and tireless, using your intelligence to improve your life.

For many of you, this phase is halfway through your cycle (some of you bleed on the full moon and not on the new moon). Now you are in the Mother aspect of your Goddess energy, the time of full moon and ovulation. You are the giver of life and abundance, ripe, full of love and passion. It is a time to value relationship, partnership, and the well being of others. Your satisfaction comes from engaging with the supporting, receptive, and nurturing roles of your life partially due to progesterone, the mothering hormone.

You are now in the time after ovulation and before menstruation. The Enchantress phase of your Goddess energy is when you may experience dissatisfaction about particular aspects of your life. This is the time to be meditative and spiritually oriented. Spend some time alone, working creatively to hear the messages from within. This phase prepares you for the release and letting go as you enter the (Crone) bleeding phase of your cycle.

The premenstrual time is a phase of the waning moon (as the moon goes from full to dark), when your energy turns inward and your intuition is at its height. Now you are in the Crone aspect of your Goddess energy, when relates to the bleeding phase in the menstrual cycle. The Crone is the one who dissolves and takes away that which is no longer needed. This is the time when you can focus on yourself rather than constantly nurturing others. The Crone sees the truth everywhere in your life, relationships, and actions and She will work upon you to clear out that which you no longer need.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 32-34,

Men are occasionally involved in menstruation rituals and ceremonies. Sometimes they give the woman a red flower or prepare her a meal before she completes her private rituals. In some menarche rituals, the girl's father has a role to play as well.¹¹⁷ "After having spent some time with the adolescent going over childhood pictures and choosing a stuffed toy, he formally hands the girl over to her mother, acting as the guardian of her childhood state."¹¹⁸ Overall, one can see that through these rituals, ceremonies, and ideologies that the menstrual cycle is something that a woman should take pride in, as a way of enjoying being a woman. She should also take the time to celebrate herself and appreciate what it means to be a menstruating woman.

¹¹⁷ Houseman, 39

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reflected different ways in which various religions promote menstruation rituals—some that are demeaning, some that are constraining, some that are celebratory, and some that are liberating. The key, however, is that women should have a choice in how they express themselves. The main point I have tried to argue here is that women should have the choice to liberate themselves. They should not have to hide in fear, but have the choice to express herself if that is what she chooses to do. Period shaming is something that should not exist. Menstrual blood should, in fact, be seen as a liberation of female power and liberation for a particular woman if she feels the need to express herself in this manner.

Overall, we have seen different perspectives on menstruation and what it means to be a woman. Ultimately, I find the need to liberate the menstrual cycle as a part of a female self is extremely crucial in the construction of self-identity, especially for the woman that experiences this on a monthly basis. Please do not misunderstand me: I definitely do not look forward to my monthly cycle; however, I am not afraid to talk about it, nor do I choose to hide it. I have learned to be very open about this part of my female sexuality. I do not, however, believe a woman's sexuality is determined by whether or not she experiences her monthly cycle; moreover, I do not believe it is the sole piece of what makes a woman a woman. I do believe that the menstrual cycle is nothing to be ashamed of. It is nothing to hide and it is definitely a subject that needs to be liberated by women and men alike.

Are we finally grasping the idea of menstrual periods as something to be proud of? Is menstruation finally being liberated as something that should not be hushed?

Women should not have to hide their feminine products in the back of her grocery cart, her purse, or under her bathroom sink. Menstruation is, in fact, a beautiful thing. Women have been associated with beauty for thousands of years. This is the twenty first century, the age of science, technology, and liberation. Learning to stop hiding behind the blood and embrace the flow is a beautiful and liberating thing.

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