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Eucontamination

Disgust Theology and the Christian Life

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EUCONTAMINATION
Disgust Theology and the Christian Life

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To the Tooch! May you be remembered in all our gatherings.

2

Disgusted Distortion

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

—1 COR 12:24B–26 NRSVUE

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, WE will explore just some of the ways that an overuse and misapplication of disgust has damaged Christian practice. But of course, “Christian practice”—however that is understood by individual Christians—doesn’t exist without reference to Christian theology. Christian practice, or praxis, and Christian theology operate in a mutually informing loop. We get our understanding of how Christians ought to behave from our Christian theology; at the same time the theology we accept and affirm is shaped by our experience as Christians. While this is circular and can, at its worst, spiral into a knot of self-affirmation, it is not *necessarily* a closed circle. New ideas, information, perspectives, and experiences are all able to enter the system and influence it in different directions when we are open to them. Psychologist Richard Beck writes of this intersection between our beliefs and our selves in that “the interplay between theology and psychology is interactive and dynamic.

Theology—good or bad—affects how we experience the world, psychologically speaking. And psychological factors can affect and constrain theological reflection.”¹

A counseling patient of mine (Paul) once told me that he thought the hardest con to pull was conning yourself. I respectfully (though I’m not sure how therapeutically) disagreed. We first and foremost deceive ourselves and hide from the reality of who we are. One way to think about therapy is helping someone become more aware of what they already know. If you want to learn what someone actually believes and cares about, asking them will give you one answer, while watching them will give you a totally different answer. It’s important to analyze our beliefs, but it’s also important to face our actions. The gap between the two is far greater than most of us care to admit.

For this reason, we need to closely examine both our experiences as well as our explicitly and implicitly held theologies, and in so doing, spend time reflecting on how our theology has shaped us and how we have shaped our theology in turn. We need to listen for the conversations that have been going on just beyond our awareness. The church, we argue, has a theological disgust problem which has been shaped by and in turn reinforced the church’s praxeological disgust problem. In other words, disgust has contaminated both our beliefs and our actions because those two are inherently linked and mutually reinforcing.

To explore this, we need to talk about *contamination* and *stigma* as they speak to the ways disgust is worked out in the interpersonal and social realm. *Contamination* is “the process of making something dirty or poisonous, or the state of containing unwanted or dangerous substances.”² In relation to disgust, contamination is the process of making a thing disgusting insofar as it makes something unacceptable for incorporation into our body. Meanwhile, *stigmatizing* is a social term for being perceived as socially contaminating. This means that on a social level, stigma is how we navigate the contaminating impact of others on ourselves—stigmatizing those who threaten to contaminate us. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* philosopher and sociologist Sara Ahmed explains that disgust is not so much a category of things (or persons) as it is a reaction to those things which we have designated as stigmatized or contaminated and contaminating. She writes, “to name something as

1. See Beck, *Unclean*, 4–5.

2. Cambridge English Dictionary, “Contamination.”

disgusting is to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken."³ In other words, we make things disgusting—we are disgusted by them—when we perceive them as contaminated. Disgust is not so much about inherent qualities of an object, person, or group, but about the concern they create around contamination. Nothing is *inherently* disgusting.

Fear, remember, is often used as the guise for disgust because it is more socially accepted and less an affront to our sensibilities. I'm not supposed to be disgusted by my neighbor, but I can justify my fear of them. Being a part of the family, the in-group, necessitates the exclusion of the other. We aren't just us, we are also specifically NOT them.

This means that disgust is relational. It involves both the object of disgust (them) and one who is disgusted (us). It is connected to our actions and posture towards that object (or group). We use disgust to protect us from the perceived contaminant. Disgust is about both our beliefs and what we see as contaminating, as well as our actions with how we react to disgust. On the social level, this phenomenon is seen through the use of stigma. We mark people as disgusting—we are disgusted by them—when we perceive them as stigmatized. So, it is in the intersection of these two facets of belief and action that we need to look for the implications and dangers of disgust.

Contamination in turn has a counterpart concept: purification—as we mentioned in chapter 1. Whenever contamination is being referenced or invoked, the concept of purification is also present—even if only implicitly—and vice versa. The relational dynamic of disgust demands something pure and something contaminating—something fragile and something dangerous. While holiness and all that is associated with God are frequently presented and perceived as pure, sin is presented and perceived as contaminating. In contrast to sin or contamination, purity is generally associated with (or even is a stand-in for) Holiness; and on one level this works really well. Holiness is good for us; holiness is opposite to sin and death—both of which are frequently represented as contaminants. But following this logic too far leads us to the theologically catastrophic conclusion that holiness is also something fragile, at risk of being overpowered by sin.

3. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, loc. 2187.

DISGUST ON DISPLAY

On Thursday, the fifteenth of February 2024, there was a funeral for Cecilia Gentili held at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. It was an unusual funeral for the cathedral because Cecilia was an unusual person. She was a transgender woman, who had come to America as an undocumented immigrant from Argentina before eventually being granted asylum. She was a sex worker and an actress, and lived her life as an outspoken activist for transgender rights and for the rights of sex workers. She had, at best, a complicated relationship with religion. In 2023 in an interview with *Interview* magazine, she summarized her experience of God saying:

Yeah, I have been reexamining my relationship with religion for a long time. I went to treatment for drug use for 17 months. At the time, I was sleeping with men, and there was no direction on how to treat a trans woman. Sometimes it was fun, but it was not the best thing for me. I am now in a harm reduction approach to drugs, but at that time, I was in abstinence, so I was also going to NA groups. In NA, it's a lot about your relationship with God. Even if you go to the agnostic ones, I felt like I couldn't do the program because I didn't have a god. I just never had opportunities to experience a faith that was fully embracing of me. Religion is such a complicated issue for most queer and trans people. I used to go with my grandmother to the Baptist church, and they didn't want me there. They made it very clear. I used to go to the Catholic church, too, and both were such traumatic experiences for me as a queer person. So I came to identify as an atheist, but I know that so many trans people have been able to find a relationship with faith in spaces that include them.

...

But I come from a family of so many different faiths, so I didn't feel attached to any of them. I had so many choices, but none of them felt right because I was queer. At the time, there was no openness. Nowadays, some churches have queer pastors or rabbis or imams. I remember I had a friend when I was starting my transition as a teenager. She would invite me to pray with her. And I was like, "What are we praying to?" And she'd say, "No, we are praying. There's a lot of power in the act of just praying." It was therapeutic.⁴

At the funeral, Gentili's community filled the building. Actors and advocates testified, sang, and chanted to show their respect for her.

4. Nevins, "Cecilia Gentili," para. 34.

According to the write up of the service on CNN, attendees were asked to honor her by “serv[ing] their best looks” and they did not disappoint, showing up in the brightest, most dramatic fashion the cathedral has likely ever seen.⁵ A later CNN article summarized the sentiment at the funeral saying, “Funeral organizers told CNN that they chose to honor Gentili at St. Patrick’s Cathedral because they felt its grandeur was a fitting tribute to her legacy—she was remembered at her funeral for championing the most marginalized peoples in society.”⁶

It caused a scandal. At one point in the ceremony, a friend and fellow advocate praised Cecilia as “This whore, this great whore . . . St. Cecilia Mother of all whores.” Less than 48 hours afterwards, the New York Archdiocese condemned the event. Conservative groups called it “unbelievable and sick,” “a mockery of the Christian faith,” “revolting,” “blasphemous and sacrilegious.”⁷

Two days later, the pastor of St. Patrick’s Cathedral announced that they had held a Mass of Reparation at the Cathedral. A *Mass of Reparation* is a specific liturgy intended to cleanse or purify a worship space in the wake of scandal, injustice, or egregious sin. Catholic churches in the US have, for instance, recently held masses of reparation in response to clergy sex abuse scandals.⁸

The story of Cecilia Gentili’s funeral gives a powerfully illuminating example of how disgust and purity frequently operate in the American church. Accounts are divided, but the specific scandal that prompted the Archdiocese of New York is thought to range from the simple fact of having held a funeral service for a transgender woman, for a former sex worker, for an advocate for sex workers and/or transgender people, for having had such a great number of “unrepentant whores” and transgender people in the building, for the immodest outfits that were worn by some attendees, for the use by someone at the front of the building (they were not at the altar) of the word “whore” in both English and Spanish with a sense of approval rather than condemnation, for reported substitution by attendees (though not officiants) of Cecilia’s name for St. Mary’s in the closing hymn, or for some other form of (real or perceived) sin. Or maybe it was some, all, or none of the above. Whatever the cause, something about Cecilia Gentili’s funeral caused the Archdiocese to

5. Kaur, “Trans Icon Cecilia Gentili,” para. 32.

6. Kaur, “Archdiocese of New York,” para. 9.

7. Stack, “N.Y. Archdiocese,” para. 6.

8. Brinker, “Mass of Reparation Atones.”

conclude that the Cathedral itself had been contaminated and needed to be spiritually purified before Sunday morning when the faithful would gather there for Sunday Mass.

From a traditionalist perspective formed by disgust theology, this is all logical if, at most, a little embarrassing, given the appearance of transphobia. God, we know, is holy and good and cannot abide the presence of sin and evil. The Eucharist is served at mass and therefore to hold a mass in a space or building contaminated by sin would itself bring scandal to the very body and blood of Christ. And that cannot be allowed—the purity and the sanctity of the Eucharist has got to be preserved.

But when we look at it all from another perspective, a very different picture emerges. Here you have a community of marginalized people, the very types of people Jesus loved spending time with and teaching, and for a moment they felt welcomed into a church where they grieved the loss of someone who had cared for them and seen them as full persons with real dignity. They commemorated Cecilia Gentili in their own idiom and with language and music that made sense in their culture and within their value systems. In showing up to her funeral in their most flamboyant and finest, they were honoring a woman who had delighted in them and told them that they had worth, dignity, and beauty. In calling her a whore, they were saying that she knew their experience; in calling her a saint they were using the language and values of Christianity to communicate to one another and to the world how much they appreciated her sacrifice, work, and love on their behalf.

And when the Archdiocese of New York condemned the service and then held a special mass to purify the church of their expression of love, honor, and respect and their grief at the loss of Cecilia, they saw the church telling them that they themselves are a contaminant to the church. They saw and heard “sick . . . revolting . . . blasphemous and sacrilegious” thrown at what they had brought in good faith, and the message was clear: “You are disgusting to us and we say that you are disgusting to God. God will not be here until all traces of your presence are destroyed.”

Take a moment and ask yourself: regardless of your theology of sex work and of transgender identities, are those people more or less likely to seek God today than they were before Cecilia’s funeral? This specific incident is unique to the Catholic Church, but its resonance in protestant and broader Christian circles speaks to the ubiquity of the response.

The church has a disgust problem.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Politics in the US is another place where we can see the impact of this disgust theology and praxis on display. As was mentioned in chapter 1, disgust often hides itself behind the mask of fear because it is far less threatening to our senses of self and far more acceptable in public to say that something is dangerous than to admit that it repulses us. Think about how different it feels to say that someone scares you rather than they disgust you. Christians in particular know that we aren't supposed to be disgusted by other people—but we can fear them (to say nothing about what perfect love is supposed to do to that fear, but that's for another chapter). Parties from across the political spectrum have long utilized fear in varying degrees to manipulate and control populations. Politicians regularly lean on the fear of what the *other* will do to galvanize their base into voting in elections and supporting themselves as candidates. However, much of what passes as fear in political rhetoric is, when examined closer, a more polished and socially acceptable form of disgust. The most egregious example of this in America today can perhaps be seen in the union of white evangelical and conservative Christians with the political right in the rise of Christian Nationalism.⁹ The theology and politics of this movement are a direct outworking of disgust eroding the message of Jesus in the church. It's worth exploring, then, what this movement is and how it's related to disgust.

On February 8, 2023, PRRI released the results of an extensive poll asking over 6,000 Americans to weigh in on certain core tenets of Christian Nationalism.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, one of the key findings from this survey showed that adherents of Christian Nationalism endorsed statements connected to contamination and purity far more than the general American public. Statements like the following:

"The American way of life needs to be protected from foreign influence"

"Jewish people hold too many positions of power"

"The values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life"

"We should prevent people from some majority Muslim countries from entering the U.S."

9. See Cooper-White, *Psychology of Christian Nationalism*.

10. PRRI Staff, "Christian Nation?"

Think about those statements for a moment and what they say about who is an "American" in the mind of someone who would endorse them. Each of them either explicitly or implicitly denotes an *us* and a *them*, casting *them* in the position of threat or contaminant—stigmatizing. They indicate an inclination towards exclusion over embrace for the sake of protecting an illusion of purity.¹¹ Andrew Whitehead, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University, writes that one of the key elements of Christian Nationalism includes "a desire for strict boundaries around national identity, civic participation, and social belonging that fall along ethno-racial lines. A 'Christian nation' is generally understood to be one where white, natural-born citizens are held up as the ideal, with everyone else coming after."¹²

In order to identify the extent of Christian Nationalistic ideology and adherence, the PRRI survey asked the respondent for answers ranging from "Completely disagree" to "Completely agree" to five statements:

1. The US government should declare America to be a Christian Nation.
2. US laws should be based on Christian values.
3. If the US moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore.
4. Being Christian is an important part of being truly American.
5. God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.

Notably, the fourth question measures the person's commitment to the idea that a non-Christian is less American than a Christian is. It is a question that gets at the idea of purity because affirming the statement requires a belief that non-Christians diminish or contaminate the country making America less American by their presence and participation in our shared political system. Using those five statements, researchers organized respondents into four categories:

Christian Nationalism Adherents . . . These Americans overwhelmingly either agree or *completely* agree with the statements in the scale. This group includes 10 percent of Americans.

11. For more on the theology of exclusion versus embrace, see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

12. Whitehead, *American Idolatry*, 29.

Christian Nationalism Sympathizers . . . A majority of these Americans agree with the statements in the scale but are less likely to *completely* agree. This group includes 19 percent of Americans.

Christian Nationalism Skeptics . . . A majority of these Americans disagree with the statements in the scale but are less likely than rejecters to *completely* disagree. This group includes 39 percent of Americans.

Christian Nationalism Rejecter . . . These Americans *completely* disagree with all five statements in the scale. This group includes 29 percent of Americans.¹³

In other words, according to this survey, almost 30 percent of Americans would be considered Christian Nationalism adherents or sympathizers. That's a lot of people.

Turning specifically to those who identify as some form of Christian, the findings become even more stark. White evangelical Protestants contained the highest numbers of Christian Nationalist adherents (29 percent) and sympathizers (35 percent). Regular religious service attenders were significantly more likely (50 percent) to be adherents or sympathizers than sporadic attenders (36 percent) or non-attenders (18 percent) were. So white evangelical Protestants who regularly attend church are the highest demographic of Americans who either adhere to or sympathize with Christian Nationalism. Whitehead's own research on the topic confirms these findings as he writes, "just under seven in ten white Christians are at least favorable toward Christian nationalism."¹⁴ This demands the question: what is happening in these churches? How are the followers of Jesus the ones who are most likely to exclude?

Additionally, the poll revealed a surprising discrepancy between our beliefs and labels. When those whose beliefs would classify them as Christian Nationalist sympathizers were asked directly about their view of the term "Christian Nationalism" 47 percent—almost half—didn't know, hadn't heard of it, or just didn't answer; while another 14 percent were somewhat or very unfavorable towards the term. The scary thing here is that it means almost two-thirds of those who endorse Christian Nationalistic beliefs have no idea what they are really promoting. We deceive ourselves first.

13. Whitehead, *American Idolatry*, 29.

14. See Whitehead, *American Idolatry*, 34.

Let the numbers from this survey sink in for a moment. Remember that almost two-thirds of white evangelical Protestants qualified as either Christian Nationalist adherents or sympathizers and that higher rates of church attendance correlate with a greater embrace of Christian Nationalism. For students of American Christianity, this should come as no surprise, as it is in line with consistent critiques from BIPOC theologians.¹⁵ Empirically, the white evangelical church in America is significantly made up of people whose attitudes towards non-Christians and non-white people can be accurately characterized as one of disgust.¹⁶ The white evangelical church has listened to their own disgust reactions, rejecting Jesus for the sake of protecting a sense of purity.

Within a week of Cecilia Gentili's funeral, news broke of Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old non-binary student in Oklahoma who had died the day after being beaten up in the bathroom by three students at their school.¹⁷ Several days later, at a public forum in Talequah, Oklahoma, the audience began asking a panel of Republican state senators and representatives about the problem of bullying in schools. According to the *Talequah Daily Press*, at one point a woman named Cathy Cott asked the panel, "Is there a reason why you won't answer about the 50 bills targeting the LGBTQ community in the state of Oklahoma? If you are ashamed of those bills, they shouldn't be there." In his response to Cott, Oklahoma State Senator Tom Woods said that his "heart goes out" in regards to Nex's death, but continued saying,

We are a religious state and we are going to fight to keep that *filth* out of the state of Oklahoma *because we are a Christian state—we are a moral state*. . . I'm going to vote my values, and we don't want that in the state of Oklahoma.¹⁸

Whether by *filth* he was referring to Nex, to non-binary students, to queer people generally, or to queerness, transness, or non-binaryness in the abstract, the language is horribly revealing. Senator Woods justified his use of *filth* as a descriptor of a recently deceased child by claiming that his job was to defend the purity of a *Christian* and *moral* state. When a state

15. See Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*; Jennings, *After Whiteness*; Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*; Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

16. For more on the intersection of white evangelical theology and white body supremacy, see Hoard and Bland, "How Am I Responsible?" 653–70; Jones, *White Too Long*.

17. Hennessy-Fiske, "Okla. Nonbinary Teen Died After School Fight," para. 2.

18. Guthrie, "Senator Calls LGBTQ+ People 'Filth,'" para. 11 (emphasis ours).

senator can call on Christianity to characterize a dead child as *filth* and to say that his Christian and moral values lead him to seek the expulsion of similar people from his state, Christianity has a disgust problem. But of course, disgust based language like that has been modeled “from the top” by the leader of Senator Woods’s party, Donald Trump. Recall that Trump inaugurated his first campaign for president by characterizing immigrants as “murderers and rapists” and campaigned on the promise to construct a physical barrier to prevent them from entering into “our” country—the space of our national body. Since then, he has routinely used disgust based language to describe those whom he wants to distance himself or the nation from. “Shithole countries”¹⁹ and the more recent “poisoning the blood of our country” (a phrase lifted directly from Hitler)²⁰ being two of the better known examples.

We learn what is disgusting from one another and, when someone as influential and well respected (within his own political ecosystem) as a president uses disgust language to talk about a group of people, the predictable consequence is that people are going to begin developing disgust reactions to members of those groups. If unchecked, these reactions establish a vicious cycle in which disgust begets deeper disgust until, in the final stages, violent expulsion of the targeted group will grow to seem routine and normal.

If this feels par for the course for Christianity or for evangelicalism, if it is what you expect from white American evangelicals, then think for a moment how wildly different all of this is from the example and teachings of Jesus who was derided as a “friend of sinners,”²¹ who touched the diseased,²² drank with the stigmatized,²³ and chose to carry “the sins of the world.”²⁴

And, while we believe that the distorting impact of disgust is most thoroughly embraced by the politics and politicians of the right, the left is not immune to it either. In times of heightened fear and especially when facing an identity crisis, disgust based thinking and exclusion becomes a temptation for anyone. We saw this dynamic on display in the weeks immediately following the 2024 election. As white Democrats wrestled with

19. Dawsey, “Trump Derides Protections,” para. 2.

20. Arnsdorf, “Trump Makes Demonizing Immigrants,” para. 2.

21. Matt 11:19.

22. Matt 8:1–4; Mark 1:40–45; Luke 5:12–16.

23. Matt 9:9–13; Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32.

24. Matt 8:16–17; 1 Pet 2:24–25.

their loss and tried to negotiate unpalatable facts about what the election meant about what sort of a people Americans are, many turned inward to see what elements of their own platform and which communities within their “big tent” were responsible for their loss.

The GOP and the Trump campaign spent over \$215 million on anti-trans advertising during the campaign, attacking Harris for supporting the rights of incarcerated transgender people while the Harris campaign did almost nothing to push back.²⁵ Despite having hardly engaged the topic at all, much less going to bat against the anti-trans narrative, in the immediate wake of the 2024 election, several prominent democrats and liberal commentators jumped to the conclusion that they had lost the election because they had gone too far in supporting transgender rights. In response to a \$215 million dollar effort by the Republican party and Trump campaign to cast transgender people as a contaminant, frightened Democrats struggling to integrate the fact of their loss with an image of themselves as resurgent supporters of “the common man” ended up accepting the designation of trans people as disgusting and began advocating for our ejection from their party platform as a way of regaining their lost identity.²⁶

Both within and without the church, designations of disgust often originate at the top with leaders or influencers, but not always. Sometimes those “at the top,” whether politicians or pastors, find that designations of disgust have gotten out ahead of them. An overapplication of the purity metaphor and disgust rejection of other people is so blatantly contrary to the lived and taught example of Jesus, that it is not uncommon for pastors and church leaders to find themselves at risk of being “contaminated” by association with, or even just sympathy for, those their own congregations have learned to experience as disgusting. When this happens, leaders can be faced with the decision of whether to join their followers in designations of disgust or to risk stigma and the loss of influence.²⁷

When our Christian practice is shaped by disgust, the consequences are grim.

25. See Serano, “Should Democrats Throw Trans People Under the Bus?”

26. See Laviates, “Some Democrats.”

27. For one example of a pastor wrestling in this way and ultimately overcoming, see Wilson et al., *Letter to My Congregation*.

WHEN A METAPHOR GOES TOO HARD

An important point of reflection here rests on the role of metaphor in our lives. Metaphors are deeply significant in shaping how we experience the world and our own consciousness. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, for example, looks at an individual's use of metaphor as one of the significant factors in diagnosis. The philosopher and chess grandmaster, Jonathan Rowson, writes that "metaphor is less like a comparison to think about, and more like a psychoactive lens through which we see, creating patterns that shape how we feel and think."²⁸ In psychotherapy, a large part of the work with patients involves reframing the metaphors they have been using in life to help them find more adaptive ways to see their world and situation. We reframe thoughts, stories, and histories so as to allow for new and more flexible ways of metabolizing experiences. Finding the right metaphor for something is a necessary step to fully perceiving so as to understand it.

Part of what makes metaphors so generative is the distance between them and reality. The very fact that our minds are not computers is what allows us to use the metaphor of a computer as a helpful way to consider and reflect upon how our minds do work. Taking a metaphor too literally forecloses the beauty and possibilities within the distance between the metaphor and reality. Additionally, when experienced uncritically, metaphors implicitly shape our frame and interpretations of reality in ways that blind and control instead of illuminating and freeing. Consider the term "surgical strike" for a type of military intervention. By using the metaphor of medicine, the term brings with it an implicit framing of the event that indicates care and healing—hiding the violence and carnage involved in the actual act. "It's not an act of war, it's a medical intervention," the metaphor quietly whispers. In this way politicians, leaders, and marketers are often incredibly skilled in their use of metaphor to associate positive ideas and images with themselves or their product. This is why every car ad is seemingly all about sex and says very little about the car. So it is incredibly important to be mindful of our metaphors and how they are shaping our realities.

Our theological metaphors are no different. They are necessary in helping us develop ways of relating to God, one another, and creation. Metaphors are everywhere in the Bible, pointing us beyond the material

28. See Rowson, *Moves That Matter*, 13.

world and what we think we see to a reality beyond us, as Lewis pointed out in *Mere Christianity*:

There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of "Heaven" ridiculous by saying they do not want "to spend eternity playing harps." The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them. All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, a merely symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible. Musical instruments are mentioned because for many people (not all) music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity. Crowns are mentioned to suggest the fact that those who are united with God in eternity share His splendour and power and joy. Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of Heaven (gold does not rust) and the preciousness of it. People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs.²⁹

Biblical metaphors help us see the Divine in the mundane as the glory of God is shown throughout creation. Metaphor points beyond itself and biblical metaphor is no different. But just as they can illuminate—uncritical, misused, and overapplied metaphors can have disastrous consequences.³⁰

Purity is certainly used as a metaphor for holiness in the Bible, but the purity/disgust metaphor can be misinterpreted and taken too far. In the Bible, Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God,³¹ a central and beautiful metaphor for our understanding of the role he plays in the salvation of the world. Jesus is also referred to as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, another powerful metaphor (especially for all of us who grew up reading the Narnia books) that expands our understanding of the Second Person of the Trinity. Critically though, we need to know how far to take these metaphors *and where to stop*. As the Lamb of God, slain from

29. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 106.

30. Theologians like to describe two ways of thinking about God: cataphatic and apophatic. Cataphatic theology explores the language we use for God, recognizing that all words and statements about God are ultimately metaphorical and do not describe God with perfect fidelity but work to explore those metaphors and see how we might use them to know God *better*. In contrast (or perhaps in a complementary way) *apophatic* theology focuses on the fact that all words about God are insufficient and therefore concerns itself with denying their accuracy.

31. E.g., John 1:36; 1 Cor 5:7.

the foundation of the world,³² Jesus is the central figure in breaking the power of sin and death through his self-sacrifice, death, and resurrection. But, being the Lamb of God does not for a second mean that Jesus grows wool, is unintelligent, or has cloven feet. Trying to wear a sweater made from Jesus's hair would be a disappointing—if singular—experience.

Jesus is the Lion of Judah,³³ but it would be ridiculous to conclude that Jesus has a mane or eats raw meat after stalking his prey all day. Jesus is the True Vine,³⁴ but nobody ever tried to pick grapes off of his elbow; he is our Cornerstone,³⁵ but if you want to build a house you probably don't want to plant him in your basement; he is the Bread of Life,³⁶ but he isn't baked in an oven.³⁷ Jesus used the metaphor of a hen to talk about himself,³⁸ but we don't expect to find him molting or laying eggs. Of course it is ridiculous to take these metaphors that far and we generally don't. But how far is too far? One of the great challenges of theology is working out answers to that question. If Jesus is the Lamb of God, Lion of Judah, Bread of Life, True Vine, Cornerstone, and so much more, the critical interpretive question is "in what way?" *In what way* is Jesus the Lamb of God? *In what way* is Jesus the Lion of Judah? *In what way* is Jesus the Bread of Life, the True Vine, the Cornerstone?

Or for our purposes, *in what way* is holiness a form of purity and *in what way* is sin a form of contamination? If we allow the "purity as holiness; contamination as sin" metaphor to play too strongly, we risk giving the impression (explicitly or implicitly communicated) that holiness operates by the same rules—the same logic—that purity does, and that sin operates by the logic of disgust. That would lead to treating sin both as sticky and as more powerful than holiness in the same way that a contaminant is sticky and is more powerful than purity. Remember, in the showdown between a pure substance and a contaminant, the contaminant is powerful while the pure is fragile. When your drinking water and something disgusting come into contact, your drinking water is the one at risk of being contaminated by the foreign substance. If we make

32. Rev 5:6.

33. Rev 5:5.

34. John 15:1.

35. Eph 2:20.

36. John 6:35.

37. This is not a criticism of the doctrine of transubstantiation; the bread which becomes the body of Christ was still only bread when it was being baked.

38. Matt 23:27.

the mistake of overinterpreting the metaphor of holiness as purity and sin as contamination, we will end up thinking of holiness as something threatened by exposure to sin.

In terms of Christian praxis, we have already seen some of the disastrous implications of an overapplied purity/disgust metaphor, but let's dig a little deeper. For many who were raised in a Western, individualistic culture, disgust is usually focused around the individual body and independent identity. I am disgusted by things that don't fit nicely into my view of myself—everything from germs and disease to bad food or inappropriate thoughts. However, as has been noted in psychological, cultural, biological, and neurological discourses (among others), this concept of the individual self is far more fiction than fact.³⁹ There is a lot to unpack in that statement that we will develop in a much more robust way in future chapters. For now, though, we just want to note that where we draw the lines of *me versus not me* is much less straightforward than we'd often believe. Acclaimed psychiatrist and interpersonal neurobiology researcher Dan Siegel uses the term MWe to talk about the interconnectedness of humans. He writes, "who 'we are' is both a me and a we, an us, a set of interconnected, interdependent, interrelationships that involve our body and its brain, yes, and also our being interconnected with something broader than the brain and bigger than the body. Our relationships are *also* who we are [emphasis in original]."⁴⁰ In other words, you are both *you* and you are *us*. Your felt sense of being a singular *me* is somehow simultaneously true and a complete fiction, as Siegel writes that the mind is both a noun and a verb. In order to protect against this paradox and to reinforce the cultural value of individualism, we implicitly marshal disgust as a defense against this more complex, interconnected reality of our identity. Put another way, disgust offers clarity in the face of our own uncertainty.⁴¹

Taking this even further, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, what we experience as *other* is also an aspect of ourselves. The beginning of consciousness splits self and other in a fictive but functional way—not in a reflection of reality. It's pragmatic, not true. From the advent of that mirror stage that we discussed in the previous chapter, our

39. See Cooper-White, *Braided Selves*; Siegel, *Developing Mind*; Watkins and Shulman, *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*; Leupin, *Lacan Today*; Croasmun, *Emergence of Sin*; Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*; Menakem, *Quaking of America*.

40. Siegel, *Developing Mind*, 497.

41. Sartre relates the ambiguity of what is me and what is not found in the interaction with slime to our disgust reaction to stickiness.

ego identity is only ever an imaginary ego. It is distinctly not the real—as the fullness of who we are cannot be contained in language. It resists symbolization. This means that our ego is under constant threat of being exposed as insufficient. The emperor of who you think you are is actually totally nude and lacking—you are so much more! We require rigid defenses to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of our fragile egos. Disgust is a powerful weapon in this arsenal, as it not only activates our physiological response to distance ourselves from anything that would threaten to expose the truth of our ourselves, but also provides the necessary justification to maintain the segregation it demands. In other words, disgust gives us the energy and impulse to get away from something gross and helps us believe it really is contaminating so that we continue to avoid it in the future.

The notorious Stanford Prison Experiment highlighted this extremely well. In this experiment, regular college students were randomly assigned the position of guard or inmate in a mock prison. The experiment was canceled early and became a case study in the ethical dangers of using human subjects in psychology research due to the abusive behavior of the guards against their fellow classmates who were cast in the role of inmate. One of the justifications the guards used for their abuse came in the form of a belief that a clear distinction existed between the guards and inmates—even though they were randomly assigned from the same pool of research subjects. As the guards limited the hygiene opportunities of the inmates, the resulting smell was then used as part of the rationalization for why the inmates were inherently bad—they were gross. Zimbardo, the principal investigator of the study who was also the fake prison superintendent, writes, “blaming the victims for their sorry condition—created by our failure to provide adequate shower and sanitation facilities—became common.”⁴² In this way, disgust was used to protect the fiction of difference from the reality of their shared humanity and overrode their normal sensibilities. One of the dangers of reading about a study like this is to assume that we would do anything differently. On the contrary, as Nathan said to David, “You are [that] man” (2 Sam 12:7). We have a disgust problem.

From a theological perspective, this use of disgust is disastrous. Where our individualist society has deployed disgust as a means to preserve the illusion of our individuality, Christianity teaches us to break

42. See Zimbardo, *Lucifer Effect*, loc. 2120.

down, to dissolve, those same barriers. From Jesus claiming identity with the poor, naked, prisoner, and hungry,⁴³ to St. Paul’s description in 1 Cor 12 of the church as one body with many parts, orthodox Christianity demands that we recognize and embrace the MWe-ness of ourselves and the church—in fact with all who are “the least of these.” Contrast what we saw with the Stanford Prison Experiment with St. Paul’s words:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.⁴⁴

Allowing an overinterpreted disgust/purity metaphor to shape our understanding leads to blaming the poor for their poverty, the disabled for their disability, the oppressed for their oppression, and the marginalized to their marginalization. Where Christ calls us to clothe those we think less honorable with greater honor, our disgust reactions—defending our fragile individual egos and the ego of our church as a place of holiness set apart from contamination by “the world”—push us to expel, stigmatize, and marginalize. A church formed by disgust is a church which is going to invest in maintaining the illusion of its independence from society and from the wider body of Christ. A church which has bought into an overapplied disgust/purity metaphor is going to see itself not as salt and light, but as something fragile and delicate. A disgust-formed church will be concerned not with who it can welcome in but with who needs to be kept out. In St. Paul’s idiom, a disgust-formed church is a church made up entirely of hands determined not to be contaminated by any ego threatening association with eyes, feet, or genitals.

Ultimately, to ascribe to sin the power of disgust is to teach in direct contradiction to the power and gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe that this is a mistake that the white evangelical church in particular makes all

43. Matt 25:31–46.

44. 1 Cor 12:21–26 NRSVUE.

too often with disastrous consequences for the church's theology and for her witness in the world. It has driven us to pull back, create boundaries, and exclude when we should have embraced, mingled, and joined. We believe that the Bible offers a counter narrative and teaches life-giving practices to help us reform ourselves in defiance of disgust's fragility. In this book, we want to explore these liberative narratives and practices to help reimagine the life and role of the church community in our pursuit of Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

3

Eucontamination

Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came into this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call “good infection.” Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.

—C. S. LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*

IN 2013, THABITI ANYABWILE wrote a now infamous piece for *The Gospel Coalition* in which he argued in favor of “your gag reflex when discussing homosexuality.”¹ In this, Anyabwile is explicitly arguing in favor of Christians having a disgust reaction to gay marriage. Anyabwile believes that gayness is sinful and chooses to argue that Christians would therefore be well served in strengthening their disgust reactions to it. As we said in chapter 2, even if Anyabwile were right about gayness,² his willingness to deploy disgust in service of protecting the “purity” of his fellow Christians and the society they live in relies on a belief in the fragility of holiness. By accepting and embracing the logic of disgust, Anyabwile

1. Anyabwile, “Importance of Your Gag Reflex.”

2. He is not.