

Beck, Richard (2011). *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality*. Eugene, OR.; Cascade.

Now that two USA Supreme Court decisions (June 26, 2013) have prompted gay activists to declare a new 5-year campaign to secure gay marriage in the 30+ states still opposed, Richard Beck's small (200 pp.) fascinating paperback (from Wipf & Stock) could prove uniquely valuable. Psychology professor Beck brings to bear on the Biblical texts and church battles more than a century of scientific studies of human emotional reactions of **disgust** (beginning with Darwin's classic pioneer 1872 study) and demonstrates the difficulty of achieving meaningful dialogue when one side starts with a non-rational emotional reaction of disgust and then only seeks arguments to defend its deeply-felt prior emotional commitment.

"The Latin origins of the word *disgust* means 'to taste bad'" (2011:21). Disgust, as Beck points out, is a uniquely human emotional reaction, universal but learned, which thus varies widely in different cultures and should be distinguished from anger, which responds to actions that do harm and treat others unjustly (2011:66; see God's anger in Romans 1:18; cf. 13:8-10). Homosexuality is but one of many controversial subjects Beck treats, showing how, for many, homosexual behavior and persons have come to be viewed with the disgust we are taught to feel regarding cockroaches, feces, vomit and rats. Beck's point about infants lacking feelings of disgust reminded me of our struggle with our infant daughter in Costa Rica (where we fought an ever-losing battle with roaches invading from the street), since she liked to hasten her crawl to capture a cockroach as appetizer before breakfast—and only eventually learned to share parental disgust. See Jesus to the lukewarm Laodicean church: I will "spit you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:16; classic disgust reaction). "Disgust is a *boundary* psychology. Disgust monitors the borders of the body, particularly the openings of the body, with the aim of preventing something dangerous from entering" (2011:15). "Social disgust is clearly on display in Matthew 9. We also see it in Peter's vision of 'unclean' animals in Acts 10....The vision is ostensibly about the Jewish *purity* codes regarding foodstuffs. But the heart of the vision is sociological, the critique that the Jewish leaders of the church were not taking the gospel to the Gentiles" (2011:9; cf. un/leanness in Rom 1:24; 6:19; 14:20). "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'"—Matt 9:11 (citing Hosea 6:6; 2011:1).

Regarding texts like Mt 9:10-11, 13; // Mk 2:1-16a, 16b, 17; Lk 5:30, 32; Mt 11:19 and Lk 7:34; Mt 21:31-32; Lk 15:1-2: "Why do churches, ostensibly following a Messiah who broke bread with 'tax collectors and sinners,' so often retreat into practices of exclusion and the quarantine of gated communities? Why is it so difficult to create missional churches?" (2011:1; see Romans on hospitality and mission). "Disgust psychology prompts us to think about evil as if it were a virus or a polluting object....Many people don't want to wear sweaters previously owned by homosexual persons, or even lie down in the same hotel bed if a homosexual person was the previous night's occupant....Just about any behavior judged to be sin could activate disgust psychology, subsequently importing contamination logic (e.g. contact fears) into the life of the church. We find magical thinking at work in Matthew 9. If sin is 'contagious,' extending hospitality becomes impossible....What worries the Pharisees is Jesus' *contact* with sinners. This worry over *proximity* is symptomatic of the magical thinking imported into the religious domain through the psychology of disgust" (2011:26). "The judgment of negativity dominance places all the power on the side of the pollutant....The Pharisees never once consider the fact that the contact between Jesus and the sinners might have purifying redemptive, and cleansing effect upon the sinners....What is striking about the gospel accounts is how Jesus reverses negativity dominance. Jesus is...*positivity dominant*. Contact with Jesus purifies" (2011:30).

"Consider the status of **homosexuality** within many churches. When approaching this issue liberals....ask 'Is anyone being harmed?' and 'Is anyone being treated unfairly?'....Conservatives, by contrast, willmake appeals to the foundations of Authority/Respect (e.g., respect for church tradition/teaching) or Purity/Sanctity (e.g., homosexuality is a perversion)....Jesus seems to place himself in the liberal position. No doubt that is exactly how the Pharisees experienced Jesus: as a religious liberal showing disrespect to authority and tradition and flaunting the purity codes by eating with 'tax collectors and sinners?'" (2011:60-61; see Rom 13:8-10). "Given that the experience of the divine is often regulated by disgust psychology, conversations about God, sin and holiness are often being torpedoed at some deep level....People in churches have always ...felt that people in conflict within the church were generally talking past each other" (2011:67). "Many behaviors are becoming amoralized in relation to the feelings of previous generations[:].....divorce, illegitimacy, working motherhood, marijuana use, homosexuality, masturbation, sodomy, oral sex, atheism, and the practice of non-Western culture" (2011:68).

HOSPITALITY (71-140). “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers’—Hebrews 13:2....’Practice hospitality’—Romans 12:13b” (2011:71, 120). “Hospitality was a defining feature and virtue of the early church (cf. Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37; 1 Tim 3:2; 5:10; 1 Pet 4:9; Titus 1:8; Rom 12:13, 15:7)” (2011:122; cf. Rom 15:7, 23-29 on Paul’s mission). However, “calls for embrace, hospitality, or solidarity will flounder if churches are not attentive to the psychological dynamics governing these experience....Purity *via inclusion*, the notion guiding Jesus in Matthew 9, is counterintuitive and, thus, fragile. It’s simply not natural to think this way. Calls for embrace are swimming upstream against an innate and ingrained psychology” (2011:89). “Disgust and love are reciprocal processes. Disgust is the primary process erecting boundaries between the self and the world. Love is a secondary process that allows others access to the ‘territory of the self’....Opposed to the forces of exclusion are the impulses of inclusion, welcome, and embrace....the practices of hospitality....In...Matt 25:34-40, Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the stranger and overtly links the ethics of the kingdom with acts of hospitality” (2011:120-21, citing also the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Matt 18:5 on welcoming children, and the Emmaus narrative of Luke 24). However, “Despite the vision of radical hospitality..., we must squarely confront the fact that expulsive elements continued to be a feature in the early church” (2011:134, then, an analysis of 1 Cor 5:1-11). “Simply stated, 1 Cor 5 cannot be understood without ... Cor 13. Again, God desires mercy, not sacrifice” (2011:137). “I have no simple recommendations that reconcile the practices of hospitality with the need for communal integrity and holiness” (2011:139)

“The central act of Christian worship is metaphorically understood to be a family meal around a table....The **Lord’s Supper** universalized the language of family and kinship [brother/sister]....Consequently, this ritual dramatically symbolizes and reenacts (in flesh and blood) the ministry of Jesus in the gospels. More, the practice of the Lord’s Supper prepares the Christian community for *mission*. After practicing welcoming others (and being welcomed in return) to the ‘Lord’s Table’ Christians leave the ritual to practice embrace *at every table*....The Lord’s Supper, through its metaphors and the missional practices it promotes, is a ritual that is fundamentally altering and remaking the psyche....The Lord’s Supper ...dismantles the psychic fissures within the heart that create otherness. Inherent in the ritual is boundary transgression....This ...creates contact between the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’ as seen in Matthew 9 or Acts 10, signaling the elimination of disgust and the associated purity entailments from the life of the community....The Lord’s Supper is a profoundly deep and powerful psychological *intervention*....The symbols and practices of the Lords Supper restructure our experiences of otherness. Through imagination and participation, the psychology of disgust...is dismantled and rebuilt into the image of Christ....The Lord’s Supper becomes a profoundly subversive political event in the lives of the participants (2011:113-14). After analysis of the discrimination against the poor in the Eucharist, which Paul denounced in 1 Cor 11:17-35: “The Lord’s Supper was the realization of new social and political arrangements, the embodiment of the social leveling seen in Jesus’ ministry, most profoundly in his acts of table fellowship”(2011:114-119). Moreover, “The Eucharist has strong, even scandalous cannibalistic overtones. The emblems—bread and wine—represent the body and blood of Jesus” (2011:19).

Sex and Privy (2011:154-164). “When Luther described the moment when he first grasped the doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ he adds some candid details about the location of the revelation....:’This knowledge the Holy Spirit gave me on the privy in the tower.’ Luther had his great insight, this theological thunderbolt, while defecating in the tower privy. In the years to follow, many Lutheran historians worked to ‘clean up’ this image. It seemed scandalous that the great insight of the Protestant faith had occurred during a bowel movement. Should not this insight have occurred while Luther sat in his study hunched over the epistle to the Romans?” (2011:154-55; Beck, however, could have done much more with Romans!). Surprisingly, in Beck’s development of the significance of Luther’s experience, he makes no reference to the important role toilet training might play in a child’s development of “disgust” feelings. In this chapter Beck seeks to unmask the religious superstition that the human body is bad and that parts of it are especially evil with fear, guilt and shame built into the attitude toward the body and sex (2011:154). However, “For humans, sex can be experienced as a deeply *spiritual* activity. Sex is often an experience of spiritual exultation and transcendence. Further, the deepest feelings of human love and union are often experienced within the sex act” (2011:159).

Although immensely insightful and for gay activists practically helpful, Beck would do well to further develop steps to enable religious persons and institutions overcome their irrational disgusts and welcome gays. How and why does the discovery that a family member is gay often transform disgust feelings and attitudes? Is it simply like discovering that your favorite imported crunchy breakfast cereal had always contained cockroach bits?