Spiritual Pollution: The dilemma of sociomoral disgust and the ethic of love

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Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, holiness and purity traditions explicitly and extensively employ contamination metaphors to understand both sin and salvation. Thus, certain sins, or populations engaging in sins, can be experienced via disgust psychology. The use of contamination metaphors within Christianity is problematic in that disgust and love are, it is argued, opposed psychological processes. Thus, the deployment of contamination metaphors within Christianity may, unintentionally, undermine the Christian ethic of love. However, the New Testament offers illustrative episodes where contamination metaphors were suspended to allow love the victory over disgust psychology. In the end, religious communities are asked to monitor contamination metaphors so they may intentionally manage the social and ethical implications of erecting sociomoral boundaries.

Growing up in my small church I was told, when dealing with people engaged in sinful practices, to "hate the sin, but love the sinner." I expect many of us raised in religious communities have heard this formulation. As a catchy aphorism, it is not bad. It nicely captures two treasured Christian commitments: holiness and love. As I was often told in Sunday School class, we love all people but don't necessarily accept their behavior. We are to strongly reject vice, but to embrace the sinner's personhood in the loving arms of the faith community.

Would that this were so easy. All around, particularly in today's politically and morally charged "culture wars," we see the spiritual and psychological difficulties of hating the sins but loving the sinners. It appears to be very difficult to balance a fierce com-

mitment to holiness with a warm, loving acceptance of populations engaging in loathsome activities. Why is this balance so hard to achieve?

To be concrete, here is an example. I have a friend who finds cigarette smoking to be, in her words, "a disgusting habit." Consequently, she confesses, that whenever she sees a smoker she struggles with making negative characterizations of that person, such as seeing a total stranger as foolish, unintelligent, or lazy. She recognizes these thoughts as incompatible with her Christian commitment to love others and she resists these thoughts. It is just very, very hard to loathe smoking and not make automatic, largely involuntary, negative characterizations of those who smoke.

In this essay, I attempt to dissect the psychology of the "hate the sin, but love the sinner" formulation to identify why this seemingly simple formulation has failed so frequently in certain Christian communities. Why it may be, psychologically, extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to deeply and viscerally loathe a behavior while simultaneously loving the person engaging in that behavior. This analysis is needed as a form of self-knowledge for religious populations attempting to elevate moral standards while embracing a wounded and sinful world. This balancing act is delicate and often goes astray: either leaning toward a mushy tolerance or tipping over into a harsh judgmentalism.

My analysis begins with an overview of the psychology of core disgust and proceeds to discuss how disgust expands outward to regulate the sociomoral domain. After this analysis of disgust psychology, theological issues are then considered. The theological discussion centers on purity and contamination issues in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Specifically, I will consider how, in certain theological traditions, behaviors and populations are understood via contamination metaphors linking the behavior/population to disgust psychology. The climax of the paper centers on the

argument that, when behaviors or populations are metaphorically understood as contaminants, love is psychologically undermined. That is, love and disgust are incompatible psychological responses. If this argument is valid, it provides insight as to why the "hate the sin, but love the sinner" formulation is self-defeating. However, the paper concludes on a positive note, highlighting in the New Testament that when contamination metaphors are properly suspended, as in Acts 10, the impulse of love can triumph over the psychology of disgust.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DISGUST

Core disgust

To begin, we consider the emotion of disgust at its most basic: often called "core disgust" (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). The study of disgust began with Darwin (1872/1965), who linked disgust to distaste. In fact, the Latin origin of the word disgust means, "to taste bad." Consequently, the dominant psychological definition of disgust offered by Paul Rozin and colleagues centers on oral incorporation and food aversions. Specifically, Rozin and Fallon (1987) define core disgust as "Revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object. The offensive objects are contaminants; that is, if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable" (p. 23). The disgust response is characterized by a unique and universal facial expression (Ekman & Frisen, 1978). Further, as most of us are aware, disgust elicits a strong sensory aversion often accompanied by nausea. Both the characteristic facial expression of disgust and the potential of nausea implicate disgust as a food-aversion system (Fallon, Rozin, & Pliner, 1984; Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). In short, the adaptive rationale behind disgust, aiding humans in selecting food from diverse ecosystems, seems clear.

However, disgust is not simply distaste. Disgust involves appraisal processes fundamentally concerned with contamination.[1] Contamination is much more complex than simple distaste; not all distasteful things are considered to be contaminating (e.g., coffee is bitter but typically doesn't elicit disgust). Contamination involves appraisals of "offensiveness" which can be extraordinarily variable across cultures (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada,

1997). Generally, as described by Rozin and colleagues (see Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000 for a summary), there are five *principles of contagion*. First, *contact* with the "offensive" object is often critical in determining if pollution has occurred. Once contact has been made, the contamination is often considered *permanent*. Attributions of contagion also display *dose insensitivity*. That is, even minimal contact is believed to confer significant harm. A fourth attribute of contagion is *route insensitivity*, where simple contact or proximity creates suspicion of contamination even if it is known that legitimate routes of contamination are not in play. Finally, attributions of contagion show *negativity dominance*. That is, contagion is dominated by attributes of harm. Although there are forms of positive contagion (e.g., when people attempt to touch or make contact with a holy person, shrine, or artifact), most attributions of contagion involve attributions of pollution, disgust, and defilement. Overall, these five principles of contagion generally follow the psychology of sympathetic magic (Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986). That is, attributions of contagion have a "logic" all their own, one that is often resistant to reason or critical thinking. This facet of contagion—it's seeming "irrationality"—will have important implications later on in our argument.

Given the cultural variability of contamination appraisals, it should come as no surprise that disgust could be elicited across a variety of non-food related domains. For North Americans (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994), disgust is generally elicited by: foods, body products (e.g., feces, vomit), animals (e.g., insects, rats), sexual behaviors (e.g., incest, homosexuality), contact with the dead or corpses, violations of the exterior envelope of the body (e.g., gore, deformity), poor hygiene, interpersonal contamination (e.g., contact with unsavory persons), and moral offenses. As this list demonstrates, core disgust and its strong visceral aversion can be linked to both *behaviors* and *persons*. This type of disgust is called *sociomoral disgust* (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997): It represents, as we will see, a profound challenge to the Christian ethic of love.

Sociomoral disgust and contamination

The classic example of sociomoral disgust also comes from Darwin (1872/1965). While on his voyage with HMS Beagle Darwin had this experience:

[1]The phrase "disgust psychology" is used in this article to describe not simply the emotion of disgust but also the suite of contamination appraisals associated with the emotion.

In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty. (p. 256)

Both core and sociomoral disgust intermingle in this narrative. Core disgust is plainly seen in how both Darwin and the native center their disgust on food. However, sociomoral disgust is evidenced in Darwin's disgust at a "naked savage" touching his food. That is, in sociomoral disgust, people and entire populations can be seen as sources of contamination. Thus, contact with these persons can elicit the strong revulsion of the disgust response.

Sociomoral disgust can extend, on a case-by-case basis, to individuals we deem "disgusting," "revolting," or "creepy." We make these attributions for a variety of reasons (e.g., poor hygiene, moral failures). Regardless of the source of the attribution, we experience strong feelings of revulsion in proximity to these people.

Further, sociomoral disgust can apply not just to individuals but to entire populations. Racists tend to view the despised group as a source of contamination. This happened in America with the African-American population and in Nazi Germany with the Jewish population. But these are hardly unique or isolated examples. Wherever hate, racism, or genocidal impulses exist, sociomoral contamination and disgust take center stage. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001) observes:

Thus, throughout history, certain disgust properties—sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness—have repeatedly and monotonously been associated with, indeed projected onto, groups by reference to whom privileged groups seek to define their superior human status. (p. 347)

But this picture is even more troubling when we recognize that religious systems often institutionalize, overtly or tacitly, sociomoral disgust (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). The most obvious example of this is the Hindu caste system where many people are born into the "Untouchable" caste of society. But Hinduism is by no means atypical in this regard. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel viewed Gentiles as a source of potential defilement. In Christianity, distinctions are made between the "Saved" and the "Lost" and the "Church" and the "World" where the World and its Sin is considered to be a potential pollutant of the church.

Disgust and love

Love and disgust at the boundary. Clearly, sociomoral disgust undermines our ability to treat a person in a warm, compassionate manner. But the link between sociomoral disgust and love can be made clearer and deeper. Specifically, certain facets of love involve a suspension of disgust and contamination sensitivity. Further, it could be argued that disgust is a *prerequisite* for certain types of physical or emotional intimacy. That is, disgust establishes boundaries of contact and intimacy; and love, as a secondary mechanism, allows those boundaries to be blurred or dismantled. As William Miller (1997) in his excellent book, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, describes:

One way of describing intimacy (and/or love) is as that state in which various disgust rules are relaxed or suspended…Changing diapers, overcoming the disgust inherent in contaminating substances, is emblematic of the unconditional quality of nurturing parental love. Without such overcoming, the act would have no emblematic significance. Love means a kind of self-overcoming in this context, the overcoming of powerful aversions, and the suspension of purity rules that hold you in their grip. It means that your fastidiousness, your own purity of being, must be subordinated to the well-being of the next generation. (pp. 133-134)

Further, Miller (1997) contends, sexual love and pleasure is only possible when disgust rules are suspended:

A person's tongue in your mouth could be experienced as a pleasure or as the most repulsive and nauseating intrusion depending on the state of relations that exist or are being negotiated between you and the person. But someone else's tongue in your mouth can be a sign of intimacy because it can also be a disgusting assault. The marks of intimacy depend upon the violability of Goffman's "territories of the self." Without such territory over which you vigilantly patrol the borders there can be nothing special in allowing or gaining access to it … Consensual sex means the mutual transgression of the disgust-defending boundaries. (p. 137)

The conclusion we arrive at is that disgust, fundamentally, is involved in a boundary-psychology. That is, disgust psychology monitors physical and sociomoral spaces to protect purity and defend against contamination. Certain aspects of love, by contrast, involve dismantling boundaries. For example, early on in romantic love, we grant access to our personal and sociomoral space through permission, like accepting that tentative offer of a first kiss. Eventually, as love progresses, the boundary-transgression is less a matter of permission and more one of psychic fusing. As Miller summarizes:

One might hazard the idea that in their early stages relations of intimacy and love seem more governed by the regime of rights

and grants, but with the passage of time and the routinization of permitted boundary transgressions, the loved one passes eventually from an intimate autonomous other to something more akin to one's own vital organ…So in the end two fleshes are made one. (pp. 141-142)

The moral circle and the Christian ethic of love. This is not to say that ego-boundaries are forever dissolved or that setting interpersonal boundaries is a bad thing. Rather, what occurs in love is that the Other (e.g., wife, child, friend) is accepted into the sociomoral space one recognizes as Me and Mine. An excellent description of this sociomoral space is the *moral circle* as described by the ethicist Peter Singer. Singer (1981) suggests that the moral psychology of human beings is grounded in the identification of kinship bonds. That is, humans have an innate and natural inclination to extend kindness toward kin and clan. Thus, we draw a "circle" around all those we identify, either biologically (e.g,, children) or symbolically (e.g., friends), as "family." We a feel a natural affinity for those who are inside the circle: It is no great chore to love one's wife, children, or best friend. Charity inside the circle flows naturally. However, for those who fall on the outside of the circle, those who are not identified symbolically as "family"; we treat them instrumentally, as tools to accomplish our goals in the world.

An excellent illustration of the dynamics of the moral circle is discussed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:46-47, Jesus says:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Jesus' critique is that if love is extended only to those inside the moral circle (i.e., family, or, in Jesus' words, "your brothers") there is no great ethical demonstration taking place. As Singer suggests, it is natural to love "family;" as Jesus says, "even the pagans" do this. What is radical about Jesus' call, the Christian ethic of love, is the ethic of "loving your enemies" (Matthew 5:43-45). To love those currently *outside* your moral circle. To extend the moral circle outward to include all of humanity. To see everyone as Neighbor, Brother, or Sister.

The dilemma of sociomoral disgust and the ethic of love. Here, then, we can now see the psychological difficulty of the "hate the sin, but love the sinner" formulation. The Christian ethic of love (the expansion of the moral circle as articulated in the Sermon on the Mount) demands that current sociomoral

"boundaries" between those inside and those outside the circle be dismantled. So that neighborliness and familial affection is extended to all humankind.[2] By contrast, sociomoral disgust and contamination appraisals erect and monitor sociomoral boundaries to avoid the possibility of sociomoral pollution and contamination. The conclusion follows that love (as described above) and disgust are incompatible psychological mechanisms. Disgust erects boundaries, love dismantles boundaries. At the end of the day, it is difficult, if not impossible, to lovingly embrace what is appraised to be a polluting entity.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONTAMINATION AND SPIRITUAL POLLUTION

We now consider the theological facets of our argument. How does the tension between sociomoral disgust and love play out in the theological domain? My goal is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of this issue, but to provide a brief overview of purity and contamination issues in the Old and New Testaments.[3]

Holiness and justice traditions in the Old and New Testaments

In his magisterial overview of Old Testament theology Walter Brueggemann (1997) summarizes and describes the tension existing between two fundamental Old Testament trajectories: The purity impulse and the justice impulse. Both impulses are deeply rooted in the Old Testament narrative.

The justice impulse finds its origin in both the Decalogue and the Levitical proscriptions. Although the justice impulse, which embodies the sabbatic principle, finds its first expression in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), it finds its fullest expression in Leviticus 25 in the description of the year of Jubilee. During the Jubilee year the land is allowed to heal and debts are remitted.

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[2]Throughout the rest of the article the word "love" and "ethic of love" is used as shorthand for what is being described here. Love is a multifaceted construct only part of which is discussed in this article. In this article "love" refers to the expansion of the moral circle: the extension, expression, and experience of familial affection.

[3]The theological focus of this article is Christianity. It should be noted that there is a growing literature comparing and contrasting the moral psychologies of different world religions. For examples see: Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin (2003) and Cohen & Rozin (2001).

Allowances for the poor are also made. As the Jubilee principle demonstrates, the justice impulse in the Old Testament reflects Yahweh's concern for fundamental dignity, integrity, and compassion, both communally and ecologically.

Similarly, the source of the purity impulse begins in the Decalogue but finds its clearest exposition in Leviticus where the priestly purity rules and rituals are found. Through the priesthood, Yahweh outlines procedures for handling a variety of potential contaminants in the life of Israel: food (Leviticus 11), infectious skin diseases (Leviticus 13-14), mildew (Leviticus 13-14), childbirth (Leviticus 12), menstrual blood and bodily discharges (Leviticus 15), hygiene (Leviticus 13-14), and sexual activity (Leviticus 18). However, the most severe forms of potential pollution are moral in nature, sins against Yahweh. Consequently, in Leviticus, Yahweh outlines purification procedures through sacrifices, washings, and offerings to manage and "clean up" sociomoral contaminants. As Brueggemann summarizes:

The focus of this tradition of holiness, which we may find rooted in the first three commands of the Decalogue, is that those zones of life that are inhabited by Yahweh in an intense way must be kept pure and uncontaminated. Thus this material is instructional and has a status not unlike canon law to protect such zones of holiness and, in a more general way, to prevent the disordering power of impurity from disrupting the life of Israel. The great threat to holiness that can jeopardize the presence of Yahweh in the community of Israel is to create a disorder by mixing things in a way that confuse and distort. The antidote to such confusion is to sort out and make distinctions, so that nothing is wrongly mixed that will disturb the order that belongs to the holiness of the Creator … it is the work of priestly instruction to maintain orderly distinctions. (p. 192)

Thus we find the same dynamic that was observed earlier, the tension between sociomoral disgust and love. As I have noted, disgust is involved in a boundary-psychology, monitoring physical and sociomoral spaces for potential contamination. We can clearly discern this impulse at work in the purity/holiness tradition of the Old Testament: the need for order, distinctions, and boundaries. The purity impulse is motivated, fundamentally, by the desire to make demarcations between the sacred and the profane. Further, should the profane pollute the sociomoral spaces, the community is placed in jeopardy. Consequently, rituals are provided to "cleanse" those spaces. This activity is best illustrated by the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 where the "uncleanness of the Israelites" (v. 19) is to be purified: "… because on this day atonement will be made

for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins" (v. 30).

Later, the Day of Atonement becomes a significant metaphor in the New Testament as the early Christian church attempted to understand its own salvation. We will revisit this issue shortly. For now, however, I want to keep focus on the tensions existing between the purity and justice impulses. The purity tradition is partly fueled by sociomoral disgust, where certain persons and behaviors are considered to be spiritual pollutants. The justice tradition, by contrast, breaks down sociological barriers; it involves the expansion of the moral circle. Consequently, we see the tension between sociomoral disgust and love embedded in the very fabric of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A final comment from Brueggemann to illustrate this point:

[The holiness and justice] trajectories of command serve very different sensibilities and live in *profound tension* with each other. The tradition of justice concerns the political-economic life of the community and urges drastic transformative and rehabilitative activity. The tradition of holiness focuses on the cultic life of the community and seeks a restoration of a lost holiness, whereby the presence of God can again be counted on and enjoyed. (p. 193, italics are mine)

To finish this section, I draw the conclusion that the "profound tension" between holiness and justice is due, at least in part, to the incompatibility of sociomoral disgust and love. Thus we discover that the theological landscape of holiness and justice follows the broad contours of human disgust psychology.

Contamination metaphors in Christianity

Backing up momentarily from disgust psychology, the cognitive scientists and linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 1999) have greatly illuminated the metaphorical nature of human cognition. Specifically, Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate how humans grasp abstractions by grounding them in more concrete metaphors. These metaphors are not the poetic or airy metaphors of literature. Rather, these metaphors are largely structured by the human sensorimotor system. Thus, cognition is embodied, reflecting how we understand the world largely through our physical and sensory experiences with our bodies. To give an example, an orientational metaphor such as Up/Down can be used as metaphor for: health (e.g., *He's down with the flu*), power (e.g., *You want to move up in this company*), mood (e.g., *I'm feeling up today*), or morality (e.g., *He's a low-down person*). The ori-

TABLE 1

Sin and Salvation metaphors in the New Testament

Metaphor:	Sin is...	Salvation is...
Purity	Contaminated/Dirty	Pure/Clean
Rescue	Perishing	Saved
Economic	Debt	Payment
Legal	Crime and punishment	Forgiveness
Freedom	Slavery	Emancipation
Optics	Dark	Light
Navigation	Lost	Found
Nation	Alien	Citizen
Health	Illness	Healing
Knowledge	Ignorance	Understanding
Relational	Enemy	Friend
Familial	Orphan	Adoption
Horticultural	Pruned	Grafted in
Vision	Blindness	Sight
Development	Infancy	Maturity
Military	War	Peace
Biological	Death	Life
Ambulatory	Falling/Stumbling	Standing/Walking
Truth	Error/False	Correct/True
Performance	Failure/Mistake	Success

gin of these connections, as Lakoff and Johnson illustrate, is grounded in our bodies and our experiences with rising and lying down. For example, being ill causes one to lie down, whereas being healthy is associated with getting up. Thus, the metaphorical mapping Bad = Down and Good = Up gets rooted and generalized to specific sources of "goodness" and "badness" (e.g., health, mood, power).

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have also worked on the metaphorical structure of our moral/ethical system. Lakoff and Johnson note that morality is often metaphorically understood via economic, strength, authority, order, boundary, essence, purity, empathy, health, and nurturance metaphors. I refer you to their discussion for a detailed account. What I want to do is to take an inventory of the sin/salvation metaphors within Christianity. Many of these metaphors parallel the list compiled by Lakoff and Johnson, and I should note that my metaphorical inventory is not intended to be exhaustive. A full treatment of the metaphorical structure of Christianity remains to be done, and should be a fruitful line of future inquiry.

Based upon my reading of the New Testament, Table 1 lists a preliminary accounting of the dominant metaphors employed by Christians to understand the salvation experience. As can be seen in Table 1, the salvation experience is very rich, unable to be captured by a single concrete metaphor. Rather, each metaphor provides a single perspective by which sin/salvation is understood.

Returning now to sociomoral disgust. As Table 1 illustrates, certain Christian traditions frequently deploy purity/contamination metaphors. As noted earlier, this is largely due to the purity tradition of the Old Testament and the role of the Day of Atonement where the "uncleanness" of the Israelites was "cleaned" and "purified." Metaphorically, within certain Christian traditions, sin is understood to be a contaminant and salvation is a process of "washing," "purification," "cleansing," or "sanctification." This is most clearly depicted in the Christian salvation ritual of baptism where sins are "washed away." In this metaphor, it is not the water, but the blood of Christ that effects the cleansing. As the Christian

hymns testify, Christians are "washed in the blood of the Lamb," and are thus made "white as snow."

As a generalized metaphor applied broadly to humanity, contamination metaphors are fairly benign. Most Christians understand that humans, as a group, might prove "offensive" to a Holy God. However, contamination metaphors are often deployed unevenly across the domain of sin behaviors. That is, relatively few sins appear to be metaphorically structured by the contamination metaphors. Most "minor" sins, although I have no hard data for this, appear to be understood by many Christian communities via the ambulatory or performance metaphors. That is, white lies, gossip, small overindulgences, or minor failures of charity (e.g., rudeness), when recognized and owned, are often understood as a "mistake" or a "stumbling." Given the performance nature of these metaphors, after the sin we "pick ourselves back up" and "try again" to "do better." We "get back on the straight and narrow path." Thus, these sins tend not to evoke a visceral loathing of the self.

But some sins are often and uniquely characterized by contamination metaphors and thus carry the psychological freight of disgust: loathing, strong aversion, visceral revulsion. Further, as our review of disgust revealed, the *permanence property* of contamination—once contaminated, always contaminated—implies that "contamination sins" are not so easily overcome. Contamination is not a "mistake" where we can "pick ourselves up" to "try again." Rather, once we appraise ourselves as polluted the self-loathing is both intense and, potentially, permanent. Further, the *dose insensitivity property* of contagion suggests that contamination sins are not experienced as "minor" infractions; they tend to be a big deal, psychologically speaking. Finally, beyond appraising the self, sociomoral contamination metaphors are also applied to entire groups who uniquely engage in contaminating sins. Again, this activates the disgust mechanism and a strong loathing toward the contaminated group manifests itself.

All of this is to say, that, although sins are theologically considered to be equally offensive in the eyes of God, not all sins are *psychologically* equivalent. In the end, disgust psychology dictates that sins can be very, very different depending upon their metaphorical structure.

Perhaps a few examples will illustrate the point. It is known that North Americans largely understand sexual sins via contamination metaphors (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994). And it is this fact that goes a long way in explicating why, in certain Christian communities, sexual sins are so different from other sins. People generally don't experience intense and prolonged guilt and self-loathing when they, say, tell a lie versus when they engage in sexual behaviors outside the scope of the Judeo-Christian ethic (e.g., premarital sex). Thus, some sexual acts are strongly associated with self-attributions of pollution. Further, sexual sins are also strongly implicated in group-attributions of pollution. For example, homosexual acts are particularly understood as a source of contamination (Haidt, et al., 1994). Thus, some Christian groups tend to react to homosexual populations with a particular intensity that is not observed in many other campaigns for righteousness. Returning to Walter Brueggemann's (1997) thoughts concerning the tension between the purity/holiness and justice traditions:

[I]t is evident that the current and freighted dispute in the U.S. church concerning homosexual persons, especially their ordination, indicates the continuing felt cruciality of the tradition of holiness, even after we imagine we have moved beyond such "primitiveness." It is my impression that the question of equal rights and privileges for homosexuals (in civil society as in the church) is a question that may be adjudicated on the grounds of justice. It is equally my impression, however, that the enormous hostility to homosexual persons (as to proposals of justice for them) does not concern issues of justice and injustice, but rather concerns the more elemental issues of purity—cleanness and uncleanness. This more elemental concern is evidenced in the widespread notion that homosexuals must be disqualified from access to wherever society has its important stakes and that physical contact with them is contaminating. (pp. 194-195)

I don't here want to comment or be taken to comment on the issue of homosexuality and Christianity; rather I use this issue to illustrate that sins understood to be contaminants are psychologically very different from sins understood via other metaphors.

But to demonstrate that contamination metaphors don't just apply to sexual ethics, two final examples are offered. I was raised in a Christian tradition, the Churches of Christ, which placed a great deal of emphasis on correct worship practices. In this, my church was not unlike other churches or religious traditions who create sacred spaces where God is encountered. In my church, this sacred space, for better or worse, was the Sunday morning worship assembly. Now, given that the Sunday morning assembly was deemed to be a sacred space, it should come as no surprise that

Churches of Christ have fought long and emotional battles about what is or is not an appropriate worship practice. In my youth, the heat of these debates both startled and disillusioned me. I could not understand why so much energy was devoted to fighting about such trivial things (e.g., Could we use a piano or not?). I now believe I understand why so much was at stake in that single hour on Sunday mornings. As a sacred time and space, where God resided, that hour and place was ruled by the holiness impulse. Any deviations from established and ordained worship practices were, metaphorically and emotionally, understood to be potential spiritual pollutants. Thus, should that sacred space become contaminated, God would not enter the space to meet the worshipper. Debates concerning worship practices were, then, governed by a contamination "logic" where issues such as dose insensitivity (even small changes to worship format were significant and emotional issues) and negativity dominance (worship change was, by default, suspect) played a role. And, given that contamination "logic" isn't wholly transparent to reason, these debates were often unproductive.

As a final example, I also observed in the church of my youth an interesting mixing of metaphors, where contamination metaphors were linked with other metaphors. I grew up hearing a great deal about "doctrinal purity." "Doctrinal purity" links two metaphors from Table 1: Truth and Purity. That is, unorthodox views were metaphorically understood to be pollutants of the faith. Thus, disgust psychology was harnessed to monitor and maintain the borders of orthodoxy. As such, "doctrinal purity" became a very powerful sociomoral regulatory mechanism. Let me illustrate. Any doctrinal deviations from the "pure faith" would, according to the metaphorical structure of "doctrinal purity," be experienced as pollutants. And there are no such things as minor pollutants if one structures doctrinal debate with the purity metaphor. As Rozin and Fallon (1987) quote from a mechanic: "A teaspoon of sewage will spoil a barrel of wine, but a teaspoon of wine will do nothing for a barrel of sewage" (p. 32). Again, it will be recalled that this is an example of the dose insensitivity facet of contamination attributions. That is, minor pollutants have major consequences. Any contamination results in the entire "barrel of wine" being polluted by the "sewage" of false doctrine. Thus, doctrinal disputes become zero-sum encounters.

Can you imagine theological disagreement with a person working with the "doctrinal purity" metaphor? No compromise can be reached. No "let's agree to disagree" outcome. No dispassionate inquiry. The game of doctrinal purity will be fought with intense emotion and with no prospect of reasonable compromise. Again, this is largely due to the fact that the contamination metaphor has its own internal "logic;" a metaphor that plays by rules which, to the outsider, render it impervious to rational discourse.

I offer these examples of worship and doctrine to note that sociomoral disgust in Christianity is not limited to sexual behaviors. Contamination metaphors are prevalent, pervasive, and powerful. Consequently, these metaphors should be deployed in a critical and reflective manner. To unthoughtfully employ these metaphors could lead to potentially dark outcomes manifested in loathing either self or Other (e.g., sexual sinners, worship reformers, or the heterodox).

SOCIOMORAL DISGUST AND THE ETHIC OF LOVE: REVISITING THE FUNDAMENTAL TENSION

It is time to stop and take inventory. Our psychological and theological review has suggested that facets of disgust (sociomoral contamination) and love (the expanding moral circle) are incompatible impulses. This is problematic in that contamination metaphors are pervasively deployed within Christianity, creating dilemmas for the ethic of love and the expansion of the moral circle. If contamination metaphors are deeply held and experienced, love may become impossible (Miller, 1997). Thus, although evangelistic and ministry efforts within the Kingdom of God seek to expand the borders of the church to include all of humankind, this expansion is intermittently halted in the face of spiritual pollutants. Thus, the push and pull of love and disgust tug at the heartstrings of the church.

This conclusion isn't intended to be defeatist. Rather, this analysis is a form of critical self-reflection. As Christian communities grow in self-understanding, they can become deliberate in how and when they deploy or suspend contamination metaphors. It should be noted that Christian traditions do differ in the degree to which they deploy contamination metaphors. Some traditions rarely, if ever, use the categories of purity. For these traditions, the analyses of this article will be of limited

applicability. However, for traditions that frequently deploy purity metaphors, should they refuse to engage in self-reflection, there will be the risk of unconsciously following the impulses of disgust psychology. The good news is that the New Testament is full of episodes where contamination-sensitivity was suspended to allow love the victory. These stories provide illustrations where love, at important junctures of faith, trumped the logic of contagion. I expect that most Christian communities would contend that love, and not contamination-sensitivity, is the fundamental impulse of the Christian faith. I thus conclude this essay with an examination of those illustrative and crucial New Testament episodes.

A HOPEFUL CONCLUSION: THE SUSPENSION OF CONTAMINATION METAPHORS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The gospel accounts

Rather than summarize all the gospel accounts, I will focus on illustrative episodes in the gospel of Mark using the interpretive grid constructed by the theologian Fernando Belo (1981) in his *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (a work, as we will see, that influenced Brueggemann's vision of the holiness and justice impulses in the Old Testament).

Similar to Brueggemann's dialectic of holiness and justice, Belo sets out the dominant tensions in the gospel of Mark, *contagion/pollution* and *debt*. That is, as Jesus enters the stage of Mark, he enters a world dominated by two competing conceptions of "sin." Belo describes the contagion view of sin below.

In Israel, then, as in other human societies, the symbolic system is organized first and foremost as a defense against the *violence* of contagion, the impurity of the confused and formless. The rational organization of productive work and everyday life therefore requires taboos relating to pollution and warding off the threatened danger which pollution represents. The focal points of the symbolic systems are centers of purity from which is excluded the impure, the misshapen, the undifferentiated, anything that breaks down forms … Pollution means confusion and the dissolution of the elements involved; it is a *curse*. People reject it to the point of avoiding even simple contact or *touching*, since impure is so violent as to be contagious. It brings death. (pp. 38-39, italics in original)

These "centers of purity" were, as Belo describes, "centers of consumption."

In Israel the symbolic field was organized around three centers, each of which corresponds to one of the three instances of social formation. All three were centers or foci of consump-

tion: the *table*, the "*house*" (in the sense of a group of kinspeople; that is what the quotation marks around the word indicate), and the *sanctuary*; this means the consumption of food at meals, consumption of bodies in sexual activity, and ideological consumption in religious sacrifice. (p. 38, italics in original)

Thus we see the intermingling of core and sociomoral disgust in first century Palestine; where food aversions get generalized to sociomoral spaces such as table-fellowship, familial affection, and religious participation. Consequently, as we will see shortly, in the gospel of Mark certain persons, based upon appraisals of contagion, were excluded from these sociomoral spaces. These "unclean" people were denied table-fellowship and access to sacred spaces such as the temple: they were regulated to the *outside* of the moral circle. Into this milieu, Jesus enters preaching a subversive message that undermines the contagion view of sin by allowing the "unclean" entrance into the "family space" of the moral circle.

Specifically, Jesus emphasized the other conception of sin in Israel: *debt* (Brueggemann's *jus*tice tradition). Belo describes debt as the violence of human aggression.

There is another kind of violence that must be forestalled by prohibiting it … The violence takes the form of human aggression; the system of prohibitions I shall call the *debt system* (the word "debt" usually being translated sin). Like the first system, this involves two principles, *gift* and *debt*, which are mutually exclusive, as are pure and polluted…[the aggressive impulse] operates in everything that attacks the body: theft, murder, aggression, hostility, desolation. (p. 39, italics in original)

So, here again, we find a second theological analysis converging upon the dynamics of disgust psychology: the tension between disgust and love. That is, Belo's contagion and debt formulations of sin fit nicely with what we have learned regarding the relationship between sociomoral disgust and love. Belo argues that the systems of contagion and debt were fighting for the hearts and minds of Israel. Contagion separated the pure from the contaminated, drawing the moral circle around the pure and regulating the unclean to the "outside." But these sociomoral barriers were forms of structural violence, sins of debt, failures of love. However, to dismantle these sociomoral barriers in the name of love/justice, by, for example, admitting the unclean to table-fellowship, would violate the purity codes. The two systems were at an impasse.

This struggle—How do you define sin?—Belo argues, provides the backdrop for the gospel of Mark. This is clearly seen in a few illustrative episodes.

In Chapter 1 of Mark, Jesus triumphs over the contagion system on two occasions. First, in verse 23 a man with an "unclean" spirit is found in a sociomoral space: the synagogue. Jesus heals this man. Later, in verse 40, Jesus encounters a man with leprosy, an infectious skin disease marking the man as "unclean." The leper asks to be made "clean." Jesus touches the man and responds, "Be clean!" In this sequence we see the directionality of pollution reversed; rather than the unclean polluting the clean, we see, in Jesus' touch, the Clean making the polluted pure. Recall the negativity dominance aspect of contagion (contagion is biased toward negative associations). Here, in Jesus, we see a reversal, the rare *positive contagion*. Contact *cleanses* rather than pollutes. Thus, we observe in these two early episodes of Mark a demonstration of Jesus' power over the contagion system. As Belo summarizes the story of the leper:

[In this passage] the word "cleanse" occurs four times in various forms, the [symbolic backdrop of the contagion system] is not allowed to go unnoticed. When Jesus touched the leper, he should have himself been made unclean, but in fact the opposite happens; we are told here of the subversion of this symbolic order, for Jesus touches the leper, and the leper becomes clean. (p. 106, italics in original)

A little later in Mark (Chapter 2), Jesus is found admitting "unclean" persons—tax collectors and sinners—to the sociomoral space of table-fellowship. Here Jesus expands the moral circle to include sinners in the "family space" of table. This draws the ire of the Pharisees who cannot understand why Jesus would pollute himself through this association (i.e., this extension of familial affection). As Belo summarizes, the table of these "sinners" was considered to be "a source of pollution, and every Jew who would be clean must steer clear of it if he is not to be polluted" (p. 110). Jesus responds by relating how he, by admitting the "unclean" to his table, is subverting the contagion system of righteousness: Jesus declares "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." It should be obvious that the "righteous" Jesus is referring to are the "righteous" as defined by the contagion/purity system. Jesus is thereby seen as effecting a reinterpretation of righteousness.

This trajectory of events reaches a culmination in Mark 7 where Jesus and the Pharisees explicitly debate issues of purity and contamination. This debate is sparked when the Pharisees observe that Jesus' disciples are eating with "unclean" hands. After the Pharisees bring this concern to Jesus, Jesus debates the true source of spiritual pollution. Initially, Jesus points to the Pharisees' failures of love/justice: failing to care for impoverished parents. Jesus sees failures of charity, rather than dirty hands at dinner, as the true source of spiritual "contamination." Jesus goes on to clarify that what makes a person "unclean" is what flows out of a person not what flows into them. The sins that Jesus lists as "pollutants" Belo situates squarely within the debt system of sin:

[It] is the heart (inside) and the evil machinations (outside), [which are] the things that really pollute humanity. The list of the evils belongs to the debt system (theft, murder, adultery, and avarice; the others are variants that can be easily inscribed in these four), a fact already indicated by the seat assigned to them, namely, the *heart*. The key to the opposition of the two circuits in which the components are not directly equivalent (foods and evil machinations) is to be found in the inside/outside scheme. The inside is the stomach in one case, the heart in the other. What comes from the stomach goes into the privy (a place of pollution and filth); what comes from the heart are *practices* involving debt (aggression). (pp. 143-144, italics in original)

Here, then, is the crux of Belo's argument: that Jesus triumphs over the contagion definition of unrighteousness by *redefining* unrighteousness as the *failure of love* rather than as sociomoral pollution (which implies a distinction between those clean and those unclean). As Belo concludes, Jesus gives "the debt system a privileged place over the pollution system" (p. 144). That is, as Jesus illustrates, it was the failure of love and charity that defiled the Pharisees. These failures of love, passive forms of violence, are the true spiritual pollutants. In this reformulation of "purity," Jesus situates the expansion of the moral circle at the center of his Kingdom ethic, reinterpreting how "uncleanliness" is to be understood. Love gains a victory over disgust psychology. The Kingdom dismantles sociomoral barriers, granting table-fellowship to the "unclean," the sinners.

Sociomoral disgust in Acts 10

By chapter 10 in the book of Acts, we find the young, first century church growing stagnant. After receiving the Great Commission to make disciples "of all nations," we find, by Acts 10, a Christian church that is still centered in Jerusalem and oriented around temple worship. After a spate of early growth, the church remains a religion only for Jews, still governed by the ritual of circumcision. In short, the church, despite its early expansion, was running up against the borders of sociomoral disgust, where

Gentiles still fell on the outside of the moral circle. This can be seen in Acts 10, where it becomes clear that the gospel message was not making its way into the larger Gentile world because uncircumcised Gentiles were regarded as a source of sociomoral contamination. Given this crisis, God moves decisively in Acts 10, arranging a meeting between Peter, the Jew, and Cornelius, the Gentile. In a vision to Peter, God decisively dismantles Peter's sociomoral disgust psychology. After this dismantling, the gospel message makes its first advance into the Gentile world. The world hasn't been the same since.

In Acts 10, after the vision to Cornelius, who is told to send messengers to Peter, we find Peter in prayer upon a housetop. While in prayer, a vision of "unclean" animals in a sheet is lowered from heaven. A voice prompts Peter to rise, kill, and then eat the animals. Given that the purity tradition of Leviticus has declared these animals to be "unclean" and not fit for consumption, Peter rejects the offer of food, stating that he should not eat anything "unclean" that would risk his sociomoral purity. The voice from heaven then retorts, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This sequence happens three times. After the final sequence, Cornelius' messengers arrive and Peter, deeply puzzled, accompanies them to Cornelius' house. At the house, after Peter and Cornelius exchange stories recounting their visions, Peter proceeds to proclaim the good news of Jesus. While Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on Cornelius' household much as it descended on Peter at Pentecost. Given this powerful endorsement from God, Peter proclaims, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" Peter then baptizes Cornelius and his household.

Peter's vision of unclean animals is an excellent illustration of the psychology of disgust and recapitulates this entire essay. We see in Peter's vision a comingling of both core disgust and sociomoral disgust. When asked to eat the "unclean" animals, core disgust is the presenting problem for Peter. That is, issues of food and food-aversions are being discussed. But, symbolically, the issue is not about contaminated food: it's about contaminated people. Core disgust is the surface level problem, but sociomoral disgust is the deeper issue. Thus, God explicitly dismantles the contamination boundary between Jew and Gentile so that the gospel message could break forth into the entire world.

It should be clear from this account that sociomoral boundaries were impeding the church.

Peter's question, after witnessing the Holy Spirit descend on Cornelius' house, makes this clear, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" Peter knows there were some Jewish Christians who would have prevented these baptisms, which would imply an inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles into the sacred space of the church. This is evidenced by Peter needing to immediately explain and defend his actions at the start of Acts 11. But Peter's defense to his home church does not settle the issue. Peter, via the action of God, has opened a can of worms. Ultimately, this issue—Are uncircumcised Gentiles spiritual pollutants?—reaches its climax in Acts 15 with the convening of the First Apostolic Counsel. There the church leaders decide that uncircumcised Gentiles are not "unclean" and can come to Christ without the sociomoral purification ritual of circumcision.

However, sociomoral purity concerns still dominate in Acts 15 where, although Gentiles are accepted into the Kingdom, they are cautioned "to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from the meat of strangled animals and from blood." So, although Gentiles were now accepted into the church, many sociomoral sources of contamination from pagan culture (e.g., eating meat that had been used in a pagan sacrifice) continued to plague the early church. For example, the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 8 talks at length about how Christians were to treat each other in regard to food sacrificed to idols. That is, some early Christians saw the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols as a source of sociomoral contamination and this understanding was interfering with communal relationships (since not everyone agreed on this issue). As Luke did in Acts 10, we see Paul in I Corinthians making an appeal to love to dismantle these sociomoral disgust barriers in the church (I Corinthians 13).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

I do not know if Belo is correct in suggesting that the purity impulse, with its contamination metaphors, should be wholly folded into the justice impulse. However, I am certain—based upon the gospel accounts, the events in Acts 10 and 15, and Paul's discussions in I Corinthians—that contamination metaphors in the New Testament are either circumscribed or re-interpreted. I think we now see the reason for restraining or recontextualizing contamination metaphors in Christianity: The purity

framework can significantly impair the Christian community in living out the Golden Rule.

This is not to say that the purity framework has no place within Christianity. Clearly, the crucifixion event is partly understood through the lens of the Old Testament Day of Atonement, a purification ritual: This metaphor is explicitly and powerfully used in the book of Hebrews. And yet, it should be pointed out, non-purity metaphors for the crucifixion event are present in the New Testament: as when the cross is understood as "behavior" and "lifestyle" (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23; Mark 8:34) rather than as a purification sacrifice. Thus, in the end, theologians, church leaders, and church members will have to decide upon the proper deployment and scope of contamination metaphors within their faith communities. Purity metaphors, clearly, have their place, but incorrectly contextualized they can begin to, subtly, erect a sociomoral purity boundary between those "inside" the church and those "sinners" on the "outside." And once boundaries are in place they tend to take on lives of their own. However, by deploying other metaphors of the cross–cross as *discipleship*, for example–as counterweight to the purity metaphors, no border is erected between the "clean" and "unclean"; what takes its place is the radical call to Jesus' ethic of love and self-sacrifice.

I expect that these conclusions will be controversial in some quarters, so let me hasten to make two clarifications. First, purity and holiness categories may be so foundational to certain theological formulations that they will persist as significant categories in Christian ethical thought. Given the likely persistence of purity categories, it should be made very clear that the present analysis is not intended to show that purity metaphors are wrong. The present analysis simply suggests that purity metaphors can have ethical implications, that there are potential consequences for using certain sin/salvation metaphors. This, I hope, is a non-controversial observation. It seems clear that certain sins, when structured by the contamination metaphor, can foster increased guilt, shame, or social stigma. This may be a useful thing. Or it might not. The point is, the metaphorical structure of a sin has *consequences* and faith communities should be educated about those consequences. Otherwise the potential for harm exists. A second clarification is that there may be some who think that my use of the expanding moral circle is an appeal for ethical relativism, political correctness, or post-modern tolerance. There is an easy response to this critique and a

more difficult response. The easy response is to note that my analysis should not be read as removing hard moral absolutes. I am not suggesting that certain behaviors should no longer be regarded as "sins." Rather, I simply argue that Christian communities attend to the metaphorical structure of their sin categories. Many acts are deemed "wrong" or "sinful" without the purity structure: Christians don't, typically, think in terms of "consumer purity." Most Christian communities would agree that materialism and consumerism are wrong, but the metaphor for self-indulgence is one of "weakness" or "failure" rather than "pollution." But we do, often, speak of "sexual purity." And there are consequences for using that metaphor. Sexual sins generate a sense of self-loathing and shame that excessive shopping just doesn't seem to evoke. And yet, both are considered to be sin.

The more difficult response to the critique of the expanding moral circle deals with the fundamental debate of defining sin. This debate is very old, set up in the opening scenes of Genesis. The two primal sins of Genesis, the two prototypical sins of humankind, are: *disobedience to the law of God* (the eating of the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3) and *the failure of brotherly love* (the murder of Abel in Genesis 4). Here we see the beginnings of the holiness and justice traditions as they begin the process of defining moral failure and sin. For the holiness tradition, God forbids certain acts (Genesis 3:1 "You shall not eat the fruit...") and sin occurs when humans are *disobedient* (Genesis 3:12 "I ate..."). The justice tradition begins in the story of Cain killing his brother Abel and dwells upon the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Note that the command "Thou shalt not kill" was never given to Cain. Cain's sin isn't framed as one of command/disobedience, but as a *failure of familial love*, the collapse of the moral circle, the betrayal of the kinship bond. This question–"Am I my brother's keeper?"–echoes down through the Bible, reemerging in the question which prompted Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' parable, the core vision of his Kingdom ethic, is a tale about the expansion of the moral circle: *Everyone* is your neighbor. You are your brother's keeper.

Clearly, these impulses–the desire to follow God's commands and the desire to answer affirmatively to the question "Am I my brother's keeper?'–peacefully coexist much of the time. But there are times when these impulses come into conflict and Christian communities differ in how they

resolve this conflict. Some communities emphasize the command/obedience impulse, whereas others emphasize the expansion of the moral circle. I cannot adjudicate between these impulses, nor should I. I have only attempted to explicate how the conflict plays out at the psychological level and the ethical implications that might result. It is my hope that what results is deeper and more critical reflection within the larger Christian community.

So I conclude that, given the ethical implications of sociomoral disgust, purity metaphors should be closely monitored by religious communities. There are psychological and potentially ethical consequences to how we metaphorically structure our concepts of sin and salvation. Purity metaphors and rituals may have a place in the church, but they need to be applied judiciously and critiqued when they are undermining the ethic of love. That is, we must be aware of those times when the maintenance of sociomoral purity "justifies" our dark tendencies to "pass by on the other side" (as the Levite and priest do in Luke 10). Jesus, in his ministry, displayed no fear of sociomoral contamination. Jesus welcomed, with open arms, those who were deemed to be spiritually contaminated sources of spiritual pollution. And yet, it must be mentioned, Jesus also set a high moral standard for those who would "take up his cross" and follow him. In John 8, we see Jesus forgive a women caught in the act of adultery and yet, after he forgives her, he sends her away with the words "Go and sin no more." Jesus was able to find the balance between acceptance/forgiveness and high ethical standards. Perhaps that balance is to be found in the sequence: that forgiveness and familial affection came first. That the moral circle had expanded. That Jesus, rather than condemning the woman, loved her as "family." Perhaps calls to holiness are best heard by "family members." Perhaps calls to purity and righteousness, when shouted across a sociomoral boundary, are experienced to those on the "outside" as unkind, inhospitable, and hypocritical. In the end, I do not know if I can find the balance that Jesus did; but, as a Christian, I feel called to try.

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