

Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality and Morality by Richard Beck, Ph.D., The Lutterworth Press, P.O. Box 60, Cambridge, CB1 2NT. 2012, 978 0 7188 9256 2 (paperback) pp. x + 201, £19.50.

Reviewed by the Revd Neil Broadbent of the Sozein Trust, a council member of the CFPSS.

Richard Beck is Professor and Department Chair of Psychology at Abilene Christian University in Texas. He is interested in the interface of Christian theology and psychology, particularly how existential issues affect Christian belief and practice. His published research covers topics as diverse as the psychology of profanity and why Christian bookstore art is so bad.

In this book Beck describes the pernicious (and largely unnoticed) effects of the psychology of purity upon the life and mission of the church. 'The central argument of this book is that the psychology of disgust and contamination regulates how many Christians reason with and experience notions of holiness, atonement and sin. In a related way, the psychology of disgust and contamination also regulates social boundaries and notions of hospitality within the church.' He draws upon the results of psychological investigations and analyses in great detail what disgusts many Christians.

He looks at chapters on Darwin and Disgust, Contamination and Contagion, Morality and Metaphors, Divinity and Dumbfounding, Love and Boundaries, Monsters and Scapegoats, Contempt and Heresy, Hospitality and Embrace, Body and Death, Sex and Privy (yes: he means lavatory) and Need and Incarnation. His conclusion is titled Elimination and Regulation.

Part 1-*Unclean*- is a primer on the psychology of disgust and contamination and shows that often 'magical thinking' is invoked by Christians. Part 2-*Purity*-discusses how disgust psychology regulates aspects of the moral domain. Part 3-*Hospitality*-examines the social functions of disgust. It looks at how some groups of people can come to be considered disgusting or revolting. Part 4 -*Mortality*-examines the existential aspects of disgust. Corpses, gore, deformity and bodily fluids are reliable disgust triggers: each functioning as a mortality reminder.

There are five reasons (pp.58-9) why anything might be considered 'wrong': behaviour may be warranted as wrong if there is a perceived failure in care, fairness/reciprocity, loyalty, authority/respect or purity/sanctity. Squabbles between liberals and conservatives (p.61) boil down to the applicability and role of the Purity/Sanctity foundation in the life of the church. I like his comment on pp. 42-3 that 'metaphors of penal substitutionary atonement make it a kind of theological "junk food": appealing and alluring, but problematic if overindulged. One needs a balanced theological diet.' Churches would do well to teach of God's expiation rather than our propitiation. And did you know (p.155) that Martin Luther's 'Justification by Faith alone' came to him in a flash of inspiration whilst sat on the loo?

Long before I read of Andres Serrano's 1987 photograph of a crucifix submerged in a mixture of blood and urine entitled *Piss Christ* and the public outrage in response to it (pp165-7), I was reminded of the Isenheim Altarpiece of ca. 1510-1515. This triptych was painted by Matthias Grünewald for a monastery at Isenheim that specialised in treating "St Anthony's fire", a sickness known as ergotism, caused by ingesting a parasitic fungus. The horrific appearance of Christ's flesh on the altarpiece portrays symptoms the monks were trying to alleviate. We may also recall that Saint Catherine of Siena drank pus from a cancerous sore, indicating the holiness of all God's creation.

Throughout the book the author drops hints and comments about wider, alternative theological understandings to the prevailing views of so many of the people he encounters. Indeed, he ends with the wise suggestion that the Eucharist is potentially the place wherein, with much education of congregations as to its interior efficacy, disgust psychology and its associated theological consequences can be reduced to its appropriate dimensions.

This book left me stunned by an overwhelming impression of the kind of struggles some Christians have to come to terms with. This is a book that any young, or even not so young, earnest Evangelical would do well to engage with. Consequently one can only praise Beck for this *tour de force*.