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Unclean: Meditations On Purity, Hospitality, And Mortality



Synopsis

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice" Echoing Hosea, Jesus defends his embrace of the "unclean" in the Gospel of Matthew, seeming to privilege the prophetic call to justice over the Levitical pursuit of purity. And yet, as missional faith communities are well aware, the tensions and conflicts between holiness and mercy are not so easily resolved. At every turn, it seems that the psychological pull of purity and holiness tempts the church into practices of social exclusion and a Gnostic flight from "the world" into a "too spiritual" spirituality. Moreover, the psychology of purity often lures the church into what psychologists call "The Macbeth Effect" the psychological trap that tempts us into believing that ritual acts of cleansing can replace moral and missional engagement. Finally, time after time, wherever we see churches regulating their common life with the idiom of dirt, disgust, and defilement, we find a predictable wake of dysfunction: ruined self-images, social stigma, and communal conflict. In an unprecedented fusion of psychological science and theological scholarship, Richard Beck describes the pernicious (and largely unnoticed) effects of the psychology of purity upon the life and mission of the church.

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Customer Reviews

Richard Beck is Professor of Psychology at Abilene Christian University. This is his first book but he has published extensively in the empirical literature concerning the intersection of Christian faith and psychology.

Richard Beck is a professor of Psychology at Abilene Christian University and the writer of the blog

Experimental Theology. That perch gives him a fascinating place to ponder both the human condition and the church's role within modern society. Within the church there is a continual split between a focus on purity and a focus on hospitality or mission. Richard Beck's simple argument is that it is a necessary tension that needs to be regulated. Churches commonly known as liberal have collapsed the tension in the favor of hospitality, but in doing this they have lost the transcendent. Churches commonly known as conservative have turned inward to guard purity, but in doing this they have lost Jesus' own mission to the sinners and tax collectors exemplified in his table fellowship. Dr. Beck's method of regulation is what strikes this reviewer as that rarest of items - a new understanding of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper that at the same time is deeply orthodox. Dr. Beck achieves this by a solid grounding of the Psychology of disgust which is the emotion that grounds purity. He reviews how core disgust is a psychology regulating food and disease vectors. He then builds the argument how that core understanding spreads in moral, hospitality and mortality dimensions. He clearly demonstrates, through simple explanations of current research and theological reflection, how disgust is both necessary and toxic. It necessarily protects groups from unsafe practices, but it also shuts down mission and dialog. Understanding purity and its basis in disgust is necessary for regulating or keeping the tension. The Eucharist holds these things in tension as it cleanses through oral incorporation, it is aimed at God while also welcoming table fellowship, and body and blood which are reminders of mortality and need are the means that keep the community grounded. The purity and cleanliness is combined with the stranger, need and fleshiness of the body. Either half - the psychology review or the theological reflection - would be worth reading alone. You get them both. One last and probably most important comment. This book is profound and simple in a way that I did not think was possible in the modern age. Writing from the academy is usually impossibly dense and understanding the purpose is not always easy. Popular writing is usually readable, but at the expense of any real impact on the reader. This book reminds me of reading Luther's Freedom of a Christian - it is a profound bolt of insight that at the end you say 'how could I have ever thought differently'.

I think this is a book that makes profound points about human nature and our proclivity towards organized religion. It casts a light on why evil (my opinion) can exist side-by-side with good intentions in all faith systems. For those of us who have rejected organized religions because of pervading hypocrisy, Richard Beck, though still practicing an organized faith, offers an understanding shoulder.

With an insightful mixture of psychology and theology, the author opens up new perspectives on the extent to which disgust relates to our interactions with others individually and in the life of the church. Highly recommended.

I have to say that Richard Beck takes the reader on interesting journey as he looks at Purity, Hospitality and Mortality. His book gives some great insight on why we have problems reaching out beyond ourselves, whether it be in the individual or group context. Truly opening up to others and accepting them is a struggle we all deal with. Beck's book is truly thought provoking. The reader walks away from this book with a lot to consider. If you want to know more about why you struggle with evangelism, outreach and acceptance of new members in the church body read this book.

Beck expertly reviews the psychology of disgust and shows how the research can be applied to the life of the church. Disgust motivates Christians to create boundaries of protection. In Unclean, readers are challenged to recognize the boundaries that keep undesirables out of fellowship.

A+

I am a huge Peter Rollins fanboy, but if I were to recommend one recent work of theology for you to read right this instance it would be Richard Beck's book: Unclean. Beck, who has one of the best theo-blogs out there, will tell anyone who listens that he is not a theologian. His discipline is psychology. He dabbles in theology as an exercise in interdisciplinary fun, but his dabbling is frequently more profound than the work of "proper" theologians, if there is such a thing. In fact, this interdisciplinary experiment yields some wonderful fruit. One of the best aspects of this book is its thorough use of recent studies in psychology. Beck doesn't just theorize poetically about the roots of purity concerns, he gets into the mechanics of it, from cockroaches in your lemonade to ethnic cleansing. This is something which theology is desperately in need of - thoughtful interaction with science. Beck doesn't fall into the trap of either setting science up at the service of his theology, or of dressing science up in some shallow theological drag. He engages deeply with the Biblical witness, Christian history and practice and sets that in relation to his expertise as a psychologist in a way that sheds light on all of it. We come away with a better understanding of why we have the gut reactions we do and how those gut reactions betray us to inhospitality. The climax of the book is an analysis of the Eucharist based on what he teaches us about disgust psychology. He demonstrates that this subversive liturgical practice is uniquely potent for training our psychological impulses to

match the grace of Jesus Christ. As a huge fan of the sacrament of communion I like any story that culminates at the table. Preachers, pick this book up. It will do you more good than a dozen books on homiletics or books about why the church is in decline.

This book provides an excellent opportunity for the church to consider and re-examine what is experienced as unclean and to be rejected. Stereotypes are confronted from a psychological perspective.

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