

“Him Little but Him Tallawah”: Dirt, the Dynamics of Disgust, and the Hospitality of the Spirit in Acts 10¹

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Abstract

British social anthropologist Mary Douglas asserted that one of the universals of human cultural activity is the establishment and maintenance of the categories of “clean” and “unclean.” These categories are used to *sociologically regulate* the moral boundaries of a cultural group and express the moral integrity of a larger narrative that shapes and guides human action. In addition to sociologically regulating the boundaries of a cultural group, the categories of clean and unclean inform the emotions of disgust and contempt. These are expulsive emotions that serve to *psychologically regulate* the actions of a social group, alerting members to threats that might contaminate the purity (and thus the legitimacy) of their moral world, a moral world that confers upon members of the group the critical needs of physical security and social significance. This paper will utilize the categories of clean and unclean and the dynamics of disgust and contamination as a lens through which to interpret the story of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Our goal will be to more deeply understand the inclusive nature of the atonement, the ethics of the kingdom preached by Jesus, and the identity and work of the Spirit in the world. Suggestions will be made as to how this story might inform the role

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- 1 This essay is an expansion of a presentation prepared for the conference “Biblical Interpretation for Caribbean Renewal,” at the Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica, September 9, 2017. I owe a debt of thanks to J. Richard Middleton for reading a first draft of this essay and for offering some very helpful and substantive suggestions that have improved its substance and style. The patois title of this essay is a Jamaican proverb, suggested by Middleton. For those not of Jamaican heritage, it is worth explaining that “tallawah” means powerful. So the title contains a double *entendré* (one of my favorite lyrical devices in Trinidadian calypso). On the one hand “dirt” or uncleanness is a small but powerful notion that deeply influences all forms of social organization; on the other hand, the Spirit is a quiet but powerful agent in the transforming of human relations toward God’s purposes of human flourishing, justice, and shalom. As this essay will develop, the Spirit often transforms the notions of clean and unclean in order to accomplish God’s work toward these ends. God’s Spirit is ultimately more “tallawah” than our distorted categories of clean and unclean.

of language, music, and the arts in worship, and the posture of the Christian community toward the poor.

The encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 is a significant event in the narrative flow of the book of Acts and, indeed, in the Christian story as a whole. It records a pivotal development in the identity of the early Christian community, where the *praxis* of the Spirit in the baptism of Cornelius leads, in Acts 15, to some far-reaching contextual theologizing by the Jerusalem Council. This theologizing radically transforms the demographics of the Christian church and the way in which the early Christian communities understood the nature and scope of the redemptive work of Christ and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa says that Acts 10 is “the climactic moment of the first half of Acts.”² Ben Witherington notes its significance beyond the book of Acts to the broader Christian story, in that it constitutes “another step along the way toward a more universal religion, universal both in its geographical and social scope.”³ But it is Willie James Jennings who highlights the cosmic significance of this encounter when he suggests that Peter’s residency in Joppa with Simon the Tanner portends an “earth shattering future” that is set in motion by a revolution; a revolution that “descends on a sheet.”⁴ As such, Acts 10 describes an encounter “that makes intelligible everything before and after it.”⁵

In this essay, I plan to follow Jennings’s take on Acts 10. I understand his “before and after” as extending as far back as creation, and as far forward as the eschaton. What the Spirit does in this chapter functions as a window into the identity of God, the nature of redemption, and the future of creation. And this cannot be understood apart from the socio-cultural categories of “clean” and “unclean,” which are central to the narrative; nor can this be understood apart from the related dynamics involved in the psychology of disgust.⁶ I am working with the assumption that the categories of clean and unclean, along with the emotion of disgust, provide the sociological and psychological substructure of the narrative in Acts 10 (and for much of Jesus’ prophetic ministry as well).

My interest in Acts 10 is not primarily Jesus, but the Spirit—though the ministry of one cannot be understood apart from the other. The Spirit, like the Son, initiates a revolutionary encounter in this narrative, one that transforms the

2 Beverly R. Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 162.

3 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 340.

4 Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 101, 105.

5 Jennings, *Acts*, 103.

6 My analysis of the psychology of disgust is deeply indebted to the reflections of Richard Beck in *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

self-understanding of Peter and Cornelius, and ripples out from there to change the demographics of the Christian community in a radical fashion. It is an encounter between the clean and the unclean that collapses the sociological and psychological boundaries between them—and this collapse is a manifestation of God’s unfolding kingdom. That encounter tells us something about the identity and work of the Spirit, and how we might identify and participate in that work today. I will make some brief suggestions towards this end at the close of this essay, with particular reference to the Caribbean context.

But first let us consider the sociological categories of clean and unclean, along with the psychological dynamics of disgust and contamination, dynamics that operate on the basis of these sociological categories. Then we will come to Acts 10, with special attention to these categories and dynamics, followed by some reflections on what this narrative and these dynamics tell us about the identity and work of the Spirit—and, by extension, about the Christian community that is empowered to participate in the Spirit’s mission of extending God’s kingdom through the renewal of creation.

Cultural Narratives and Moral Boundaries

No one has explored how the categories of clean and unclean shape social life and infuse it with meaning more than British social anthropologist Mary Douglas. Her 1966 book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, is a rich exploration of how conceptions of dirt, cleanliness, pollution, purity, taboo, hygiene, deviance, and crime serve as indicators for the central plot-line of a cultural narrative and the operative assumptions of its moral universe.⁷ For Douglas, simple artifacts and common ideas can reveal the inner logic of a culture. They function like a peephole, offering a panoramic perspective on the moral boundaries and priorities of an entire cultural system.⁸ For Douglas, there is no more pervasive or powerful window for seeing into the breadth and depth of a cultural system than the notion of “dirt”—of what is clean and what is unclean.

In Trinidad and Tobago that peephole might be the rituals that make up Carnival, and in Jamaica (as well as Trinidad and Tobago) we could point to the notion

7 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

8 A peephole (also called a peekhole, spyhole, or doorhole) is a small security feature found in the entry doors of most North American homes. Approximately a 1/2 inch in diameter, the peephole allows someone on the inside of the house to get a wide-angle view of the area outside of the door while at the same time allowing little to no visibility from the outside.

of Anansi, the spider man trickster of West African folklore.⁹ Our narrative in Acts suggests that the notion of *kosher* deeply shapes the moral boundaries of Jewish identity. When you've understood these rituals and notions you've gotten very close to the essence of what it means to be Trinbagonian or Jamaican or Jewish, and what the good life entails for each.¹⁰ But for Douglas, dirt is the most basic, universal and revealing notion of all, such that all other competing notions are ultimately built upon it.

Douglas defines dirt as "matter out of place." In order for something to be considered "dirty" in this sense two conditions have to be in place: A set of ordered relationships, or a classification system, and a violation of that order. So, earth outside is not dirty; but earth on the kitchen table is dirty. Saliva in the mouth is not dirty; but saliva dried on the side of the mouth is dirty. Mucus in the nose is not dirty; but mucus on the finger is dirty. A plastic bottle in your hand is not dirty; but a plastic bottle on the side of the road is dirty. What makes the earth, saliva, mucous, and bottle "dirty" are where they are located. When they are located in areas that are classified as "clean," those areas become contaminated or "dirty." When the earth, saliva, mucous, and bottle are removed from those areas they are "clean" again. Cleanliness and dirtiness then become a matter of things being in their proper place according to a classification system. Dirt, saliva, mucous, and the bottle are not "dirty" *per se*, they become dirty when they are found in places they should not be. Dirt does not belong on the table, saliva does not belong on the side of the mouth, mucous does not belong on a person's finger, and plastic bottles do not belong on the side of the road.

The same principle applies when something out of place undermines a social classification system. For instance, Canaanites in Canaan are not dirty; but Canaanites in the Promised Land are dirty. The poor person on the side of the road is not dirty, the poor person at an upscale wedding reception is dirty. The Muslim visiting the church is not dirty, the Muslim queuing up for the Eucharist is dirty. Thus, for Douglas, "dirt is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there

9 For the figure of Anansi/Anancy in Jamaican culture, see chap. 3: "Speak of the Advent of New Light: Jamaican Proverbs and Anancy Stories," in Hugh Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008). The Jamaican aphorism "him little but him tallawah" (used in the title of this essay) embodies the Anansi spirit, by referring to someone whose ambitions and accomplishments ought never be limited by physical size, financial resources, or political power. This is true of many Caribbean nations. In Jamaica, we can think of many accomplishments in the fields of athletics (especially track and field) and music (reggae) that far outstrip the size of its population and its financial and political assets, not to mention three Miss World titles (1963, 1976, 1993). With regard to Trinidad and Tobago, my late father-in-law would regularly note in conversations that "the most beautiful women in the world are from Trinidad" (based on his devotion to his two daughters, and that a Trinidadian woman had won a Miss Universe Title in 1977 and a Miss World title in 1986). His greatest boast however was that Trinidad was the originator of the only musical instrument created in the twentieth century (steel pan).

10 Trinbagonian refers to people from Trinidad and Tobago.

is a [classification] system.”¹¹ These classification systems constitute part of the cognitive dimension of a culture, and as such are the building blocks for the moral boundaries of any cultural system.

Further, these classification systems are never morally neutral. Things are classified the way they are according to a design and for a purpose. There is always an *ought* behind every ordering, a *purpose* behind every pattern, a *target* for every taxonomy. Any ordering is always an ordering *towards something*, towards some *telos* or goal.¹² It is not simply a fact that food is on the plate and not on the table; food *ought* to be on the plate and never on the table. It is not simply a fact that Peter might choose not to go into Cornelius’s house, he *ought* never go into Cornelius’s house.

When the boundaries of clean and unclean are crossed moral boundaries are violated and contamination takes place. Immediately the imperative to re-order and atone for the violation arises. Whatever is challenging the classification system, and thus threatening its implicit *telos*, has to be fixed. We have to “clean up the mess,” “atone for our sins,” or otherwise purify what has become polluted. This obligation to assert and sustain moral order is so strong that sociologist Christian Smith says it is a fundamental motivator behind all human activity.¹³ Consequently, we should expect to find the notions of clean and unclean, and the classification systems they suggest, at the center of any moral vision, and therefore as the drivers behind much of our social action.¹⁴

Disgust Psychology as Boundary Indicator

When we talk about moral stories and moral orders driving human action we need

11 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 48.

12 On this point see Eric G. Flett, *Persons, Powers, and Pluralities: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), chaps. 2–3, and James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies 1; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), chaps. 1–2.

13 Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 2.

14 To move our analysis even deeper into the theological anthropology that informs this essay, we might note that the classification systems we inherit from our social environments provide the human creature with two fundamental needs: security or safety; and significance. This is why the maintenance of social order is such a primal motivator for human behavior. When we can classify things into a coherent pattern we feel safe, and we usually classify things into patterns that also confer upon us a sense of personal significance. In effect, we classify the world in such a way as to deny our own fragility and vulnerability by rooting our security and significance in our ability to deny the reality of death. So, when our classification systems are challenged (as they are in Acts 10) we confront “death” psychologically by being reminded that our classification systems are social creations, and highly idiosyncratic ones at that, and that there is more than one way to categorize human experience. If our security and significance are not tethered in some way to something *that transcends our classification systems* we will inevitably engage in violence in order to assert our own safety and significance in the face of death. See further on this Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

to come to terms with the psychological dynamics of disgust, as this emotion is deeply connected to what a given culture classifies as clean and unclean, pure and polluted, orderly and deviant, sacred and profane. The *sociological* concepts of clean and unclean regulate the *psychological* experience of disgust. In order to map the geography of a people's moral vision we must attend to human emotions, and no emotion is a better indicator that a moral boundary has been discovered and breached than disgust.¹⁵ The emotion of disgust is structurally bound to a given culture's moral vision, and in particular how that moral vision defines what is clean and the unclean.

The emotion of disgust is of particular interest in this essay not simply because it features prominently in the narrative of Acts 10 (as we shall see), but because it is one of the most powerful and universal human emotions for highlighting threats to the safety and significance of human persons.¹⁶ It does this by protecting boundaries (physical, social, and ontological) and by expelling threats in a way that other emotions do not. These factors and functions make the emotion of disgust in Acts 10 an interesting lens through which to consider the universal work of the Spirit in fostering a moral vision where transformed relationships between persons and groups is a significant indicator that the kingdom of God is at hand and that shalom and justice are being pursued.

When we attend carefully to the narrative of Act 10 we shall see that the dynamics of disgust, via the categories of clean and unclean, reveal the radical hospitality of the Spirit's work, the reconciliatory nature of the atonement, and the revolutionary inclusivity of the kingdom of God. With the descent of the sheet and the baptism of Cornelius a significant boundary marker in the moral narrative

15 Sociologist Christian Smith notes that "emotions provide excellent telltale indicators of the moral assumptions, convictions, and expectations that pervade and order our personal and collective lives...[emotional responses] are signs of moral orders fulfilled and moral orders violated." Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 15. The professors reading this essay may recall the emotions they felt the last time they read a student paper and discovered that plagiarism had taken place. Feelings of disgust and indignation are likely the first emotions to arise. For the student, when called to the professor's office to explain, the first emotions were likely fear that they had been caught and would be "expelled" from class. In both instances the emotional responses signify a boundary crossing, and in this case the boundaries of the moral world of academia.

16 In terms of the universal nature of disgust, Richard Beck cites the work of Paul Ekman who notes that the distinctive facial expressions that accompany the experience of disgust are universal across cultures, making disgust, according to Beck, "an innate feature of a shared and universal human psychology." See Beck, *Unclean*, 14–15. In terms of the power of disgust as an interpersonal boundary-monitoring psychology one need only note psychologist John Gottman's assertions that the most reliable predictor for marital failure are the emotions of contempt and disgust. See Beck, *Unclean*, 110. On a social level one need only note the metaphors used to justify wars, crusades, and genocides, rooted as they are in appeals to ethnic "cleansing." The metaphors used often have to do with purity and pollution, and as such capitalize on the emotions of disgust and contempt.

of Israel is displaced, and consequently, the work of the Spirit is radically universalized and socially embodied.¹⁷

But before we get to Act 10, it will be important to understand the kinds of disgust that sociologists have classified and what stimuli commonly generate disgust; we will also examine how disgust functions to protect purity and cleanliness and how contamination works. All of this plays a role in making sense of the narrative in Acts 10 and the work of the Spirit.

Disgust Domains and Stimuli

Social psychologist Paul Rozin identifies three forms of disgust, which he calls “disgust domains.” They are *Core Disgust* (revulsion centered on eating and oral incorporation), *Animal-Reminder Disgust* (revulsion centered on death reminders; they remind us that we are animals who will die), and *Sociomoral Disgust* (revulsion centered on moral and social judgments).¹⁸ Although all three forms of disgust are related, Core Disgust is concerned primarily with threats to the physical well-being of a person, while the latter two forms are concerned primarily with threats to the social and ontological security and significance of persons.¹⁹

Each disgust domain is triggered by different kinds of stimuli. *Core Disgust* is commonly triggered by food (discoloration, offensive odors), bodily products (mucus, blood, semen, pus, vomit, feces), and poor hygiene (body odor, bad breath, discolored teeth, oily skin, etc.).²⁰ It reminds us that ingestion of certain kinds of food or bodily products and poor bodily maintenance can be a threat to our physical wellbeing. We recoil at bad breath, potential contact with fecal matter, and discolored food.

Animal-Reminder Disgust has to do with stimuli that remind us of our finitude,

17 Drawing on the essay by J. Richard Middleton (“The Inclusive Vision of Isaiah 56 and Contested Ethical Practices in Scripture and the Church: Toward a Canonical Hermeneutic of Discernment”) in this themed journal issue, we could say that by moving the boundary marker that designated gentiles as “unclean” in Acts 10 the Spirit reasserts and restores a creational trajectory of shalom that reaches back to the narrative of Genesis 1. The Spirit thus restores just relationships between persons and groups that have been broken and fragmented; this fragmentation has resulted from the placement of boundaries that force one group to identify another as pollutants, contaminants, and threats. The work of the Spirit thus returns us to the plenitude and plurality of the Garden in the context of shalom by making all things clean, holy, and sacred. Clean and unclean, even if they were temporary categories to be used by Israel to designate various foods, are no longer to be used to designate other persons.

18 See Beck, *Unclean*, 19.

19 Ontological here refers to our very existence.

20 Consider for a moment the global deodorant industry and its dedication to combating and covering up human odors that are deemed dirty and disgusting while promoting those we define as clean and pleasant. Billion-dollar industries revolve around the cleaning rituals that take place in our bathrooms (soaps, shampoos, body washes, body sprays, chewing gum, mints, mouthwashes, toothbrushes, floss, mouth sprays, toothpastes, anti-perspirants, and deodorants (for the feet, underarms, and genitals). And this does not even account for the many products we use to keep the bathroom itself “clean.”

vulnerability, and mortality. We typically avoid contact with dead bodies, assigning this responsibility to a special class of person. We turn away from violations of the body that result in blood, gore, deformity, or decay. We look with suspicion and anxiety at the person whose worldview assumptions are a direct challenge to our own and label them lunatics, mentally ill, heretics, liberals or fundamentalists (depending on where we stand), or fanatics, etc.²¹

Finally, *Sociomoral Disgust* occurs when certain persons, or animals (rats, snakes, insects, wild meat), or symbols (the Confederate flag, the Rainbow flag), or actions (especially sexual behaviors such as incest, rape, harassment), or other social behaviors (not standing for the national anthem, passing gas loudly in an elevator) become sources of contamination. We keep our distance from those we consider unclean. This may include those who are morally corrupt, socially deviant, or spiritually malevolent; those with whom we differ politically, theologically, ethnically, or racially.

So we may refuse to socialize with the church gossip, or entertain the ideas of the homosexual, or visit the obeah lady; we may refuse to participate in Carnival, or avoid bringing reggae or patois into a Christian service of worship. If we do any of these acts of boundary crossing, we might feel that contamination has taken place and a purification process will be required. If we don't participate in the purification process (however defined), we will remain contaminated and will suffer social exclusion for violating the moral order of the group.

Disgust Dynamics

Although the emotion of disgust is triggered by different stimuli in each of these domains, there are some universal features of disgust psychology that are operative regardless of the disgust domain or the triggering stimuli. Beck explains that disgust functions as a *boundary monitor* and is *expulsive* in nature; contamination is thought to take place according to *magical thinking*; and disgust is *promiscuous*, in the sense that it can be triggered by a wide variety of culture-specific stimuli.²² Let's concisely note each of these fundamental components that dictate how disgust works, and then examine the principles by which contamination appraisals are made.

1. *Boundary monitoring.* Disgust is an emotion that monitors boundaries hav-

21 Combating and covering up body odors of whatever kind, while a seemingly superficial act of politeness in consideration of others, can also be understood as an act that seeks to repress the fact that we are (according to the Bible) finite creatures that have originated from the dirt and are destined to return to it (Gen 2:7; 3:19). We prefer the language of Psalm 8:5 where we are described as being "a little lower than the angels" (LXX) to the metaphors of the Garden that describe us as earth creatures (made from the dust of the ground). However, the way we smell in unguarded (and un-deodorized) moments is proof enough of our earthly origins.

22 See Beck, *Unclean*, chaps. 1 and 2 for a fuller discussion of these dynamics.

ing to do with “in” and “out”—whether those boundaries are physical or social—in order to prevent contamination. Physically, those boundaries center around the mouth and what we put into it. Disgust instructs us to keep out that which is toxic.²³

But human beings rarely limit themselves to their bodies when it comes to boundaries for the self. We are, according to sociologist Peter Berger and anthropologist Ernest Becker, constantly “externalizing” the self into the social world through symbols, relationships, institutions, and artifacts of all kinds.²⁴ And so, disgust monitors social boundaries as well. In this domain, disgust seeks to prevent threats not only to our physical wellbeing, but also to our existential security and significance. Thus someone may be disgusted when they see their national flag burned, their children belittled, or their favorite athlete (for example, Usain Bolt) accused of doping. Disgust thus indicates a perceived threat to the boundaries of one’s identity.

2. *Expulsive.* Disgust is an expulsive mechanism, whether it causes one to withdraw from a potential contaminant or causes one to expel or annihilate an actual contaminant. So when that threat presents itself, it must be immediately and decisively dealt with; the preservation of safety requires immediate withdrawal, expulsion, or annihilation of the contaminant. If disgust says “don’t eat that smoked oyster,” but under duress from a friend you do so anyway, disgust may call upon a gag reflex and the sensation of nausea to have it immediately expelled after it has passed the boundary of your mouth.²⁵

Indeed, even if something passes these tests and we are later told, after swallowing, that the milk we just drank was not in fact cow’s milk, but some other sort of milk that we do not typically drink in our culture, that violation of a sociomoral boundary will send our physical bodies into expulsion mode to dislodge the contaminant in order to preserve not only our health, but the boundaries of our moral vision.

For instance, in American culture cow’s milk is lauded as a basic and nutritious part of a healthy and successful life (there are posters towards this end in every middle school and high school cafeteria across the United States), as are other cow products like cheese, yogurt, leather, and beef. A cow is defined as “clean” in the moral vision of American culture. But change the animal to one not con-

23 Thus, we don’t eat fecal matter; we avoid food that is discolored; and we turn away food that generates an offensive smell. More often than not disgust is a faithful instructor in maintaining healthy boundaries for the body, but sometimes disgust gets confused and instructs us to restrict something that, although disgusting in appearance or offensive in odor, is actually both delicious and nutritious—like (in my opinion) smoked oysters.

24 Becker, *Denial of Death*, passim; Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

25 Spitting, gagging, and vomiting are universal, physical reflexes for expelling contaminants from our bodies, whether on the basis of taste, texture, temperature, or smell.

sidered clean according to the classification system underlying the American moral vision, such as a dog, goat, horse, or camel, and you will get a very different response indeed.²⁶

And of course, the human person is in a category all of its own. To use a human body to generate products like milk, meat, and organs, as if a human was simply another animal, would completely undermine our moral vision; we are thus properly disgusted when we read about instances of cannibalism, the sale of organs, or the exchange of people as if they were commodities.

These latter examples take us into the realm of interpersonal boundaries and, as such, the domain of Sociomoral Disgust. Expulsive mechanisms are just as powerful and forceful in the sociomoral domain as in the physical domain of Core Disgust. Sociomoral Disgust warns us to avoid, withdraw from, insult, and even destroy those people and things we deem unclean or deviant, lest they contaminate the social envelope we maintain around ourselves. And so, proximity to that which is deemed unclean needs to be highly regulated.

This explains, in part, why Peter in Acts 10 needs a divine vision, a divine voice, *and* Cornelius's personal messengers, in order to get him from Simon the Tanner's house to the house of Cornelius.²⁷ As the communication theorist Edward T. Hall once noted: "space speaks."²⁸ It speaks volumes about what we consider clean and unclean. Peter wants to maximize his distance from that which is unclean but the Spirit goes to great lengths to get him closer to the perceived contaminant: Cornelius and his house. Thus the Spirit transforms Peter by transforming the classification system that sustains Peter's moral vision. This in turn is generative of the new social order that Jesus referred to as the kingdom of God, the experience of which the Spirit is sent to confer upon all humanity.

3. *Magical Thinking.* Disgust determines contamination on the basis of a causality that often defies the laws of rationality and physics and has more to do with the laws of similarity and association. This is true especially in the domains of

26 In 2013 Burger King restaurants in the United Kingdom discontinued purchasing meat from an Irish beef supplier when traces of horsemeat were found in the beef patties it supplied, sometimes consisting of up to 29% of the product. Burger King noted that the decision was not related to "food safety," but instead to the fact that people in Britain and Ireland "do not have a tradition of eating horses." For that breach of moral norms Burger King was sarcastically referred to as "Sherger King", "Sherger" being the name of a famous Irish racehorse. There are examples from the United States, but they are not nearly as entertaining.

27 Why Peter is in the house of a tanner in the first place is interesting enough. That puts him spatially proximate to someone working with dead animals, and thus in danger of contamination himself. But, with Simon being a Jew, both he and Peter would have shared the same assumptions for maintaining their moral purity via rituals of cleansing, thus preventing permanent contamination. And they would both have followed Jewish dietary habits. Such assumptions, however, would not have been shared by Cornelius and his household, thus making entering the space of a gentile more dangerous.

28 Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), chap. 10: "Space Speaks."

sociomoral and Animal-Reminder Disgust. Sympathetic magic is an anthropological term used to describe “a variety of primitive beliefs about how spiritual or magical artifacts might have effects upon other objects.”²⁹

A good example is a voodoo doll. Its potency as a tool of manipulation is rooted in the fact that it is not only composed of some physical item from the person the practitioner of voodoo wants to manipulate (a piece of hair or clothing), but also resembles the appearance of the person they want to control. Similarity and association are critical if the doll is to exert its causal powers.

It should also be noted that sympathetic magic is not a form of causality employed only by “primitive” people. It is a pervasive feature of human thinking, on evidence in the case of anyone who follows a horoscope, goes out of their way to get a selfie with a celebrity, or is an avid follower of a sports team. At a subliminal level, if not always explicitly, such persons expect the alignment of the stars, their proximity to a famous person, or their particular forms of devotion to an athletic team to have some causal effect on physical realities in each instance.³⁰

In the case of disgust, magical thinking instructs us to conclude that contamination has or will take place if we come too close to a contaminant. Thus magical thinking might make us cringe from the idea of wearing a sweater once worn by Hitler, Idi Amin, or Pol Pot. Some people would never exchange goods or services with an openly gay couple. Some Christians refuse to listen to non-Christian music. Others might intentionally avoid contact with the poor and vulnerable lest their “bad luck” might somehow be transferred to them. These kinds of contamination appraisals take place according to magical thinking, a form of logic that overrides normal reason, and relies more on similarity, proximity, and association to determine contamination than any actual transfer of evil, deviance, death, and pollution.

4. *Promiscuous.* Different cultural contexts connect the emotion of disgust to a variety of stimuli, usually in a way where disgust is triggered by stimuli a particular group considers a threat to its collective purity, security, and significance.

It’s been frequently said that children have to be taught to hate. They also have to be taught that specific stimuli are disgusting.³¹ Often the two coincide. It is the promiscuous nature of disgust psychology that is the most personally and culturally revealing, as it takes the general and universal dynamics of disgust and at-

29 Beck, *Unclean*, 24.

30 In the example of someone devoted to a sports team, I think of the character of Pat Sr played by Robert DeNiro in the film *Silver Linings Playbook*, where one storyline involves his recurring efforts to co-opt his son into the magical rituals he employs to ensure the success of his beloved Philadelphia Eagles. Special snacks are prepared, fabrics employed, jerseys worn, and the TV remote has to be orientated in a specific position if success is to be achieved.

31 For instance, a very young child will think nothing of eating what comes out of its nose, spreading fecal matter over a bedroom wall, peeing indiscriminately and upon impulse, or placing in its mouth any number of colorful or curious items found on a sidewalk or under a desk.

taches those dynamics to culturally specific stimuli, often in the earliest years of life.³² The result is that the child is habituated into the broad contours of a moral order, which will communicate to them that they are persons of significance in a world of meaning—the social equivalent of a second womb.³³

This makes disgust an incredibly powerful instructor for moral boundaries—revealing what a culture values and protects, and what it deems dangerous and defiling. Objects of disgust disclose the priorities of a cultural system precisely because objects of disgust differ widely from one social grouping to another.

When the boundaries of the cultural system are breached the parent will usually reinforce them quite forcefully, gouging the pollutant from the mouth or hand of the child and throwing it far from the child's body with some well-chosen words. Through this the child learns an important lesson about what belongs in its moral word and what does not.

These lessons continue, and as the child gets older those lessons have more to do with pollutants in the sociomoral and animal reminder domains than with the Core Disgust domain having to do with food (Who are your friends? Who do you welcome into your house? What makes you anxious and afraid? What political opinions to you ridicule and which do you affirm? What do you spend your money on? etc.). The promiscuous nature of disgust means that “disgust can be captured and harnessed by multiple aspects of a given culture, connecting disgust to stimuli unrelated to food or food aversions. This is the reason why we find disgust—a food aversion system—associated with social, moral and religious domains.”³⁴ And we find all three interrelated in our narrative in Acts 10.³⁵

32 Richard Beck notes that the same cannot be said regarding the emotions of happiness, fear, sadness or anger. The triggers for those emotions appear to be relatively consistent across cultures. Disgust, unlike these other emotions, has a “sensitive period” where it is deeply connected to culturally specific stimuli. See Beck, *Unclean*, 18.

33 This habituation process is incredibly powerful. My sons know that jazz plays a critical role in my own moral world, not because I sat them down and said “jazz is the greatest art form in the world and it is very important to me” (although I have done that), but because I listen to jazz all the time, take them to concerts, know the names of the musicians, the songs played, the variations on those songs, and the albums produced. They see me look with scorn upon someone talking during a performance and arrive with me well in advance of the performance time so we can get seats up front. They listen to me anticipate the event weeks before it arrives and watch me applaud and whistle upon the completion of each solo. A moral order is communicated through ritual performance and deeply impacts the plasticity of the human creature in a nearly irreversible fashion. Words are rarely necessary, and by the time words arrive on the scene much of the heavy lifting involved in shaping one's moral order is complete. Any new additions or subtractions come only under great pressure and effort, like learning a new language. Such is the power of disgust.

34 Beck, *Unclean*, 18.

35 The narrative of Acts 10 shows the power of disgust. For Cornelius to be deemed clean by Peter will require a strange dream and divine assistance, and the hospitality and patience of a stranger. Such is the Spirit's work.

Principles of Contagion

But how exactly does contamination take place in each of these domains? Paul Rozin has identified four primary principles of contagion, means by which the clean comes to be contaminated by the unclean.³⁶

While it would take us too far afield to go into all four principles, two are directly relevant to our study of Acts 10—the principles of dose insensitivity and negativity dominance.

The principle of dose insensitivity asserts that the *amount* of the pollutant is irrelevant in making a contamination appraisal. It does not matter if one, or many, unclean persons touch Jesus, he will be just as unclean after the first touch as he would with the last. It does not matter if he is casually touched on the hand by someone unclean, or if he is given a hug and a kiss. Each gesture confers contamination equally. Likewise, it does not matter how many gentiles Peter associates with in Acts 10, he will be rendered unclean by contact with even one—Cornelius.

In contrast, the principle of negativity dominance asserts that the *power* of the pollutant will always overcome the power of the pure object. It does not matter how “holy” a person is, whether they are a scribe or the Chief Priest, if either has contact with something unclean they will be equally contaminated. Pollutants don’t need to prey on weakness; they have the power to contaminate things large or small, like a virus.

Negativity dominance and dose insensitivity seem to be clearly operative in assertions that, as far as God is concerned, one sin is the same as any other. In addition, both of these principles of contagion are behind legal prohibitions and anxieties regarding racial mixing found, formally and informally, in many parts of the world.³⁷ Bob Marley suffered under such anxieties as the child of a white father and a black mother. This perhaps explains why Marley, in the end, rooted the deepest features of his identity in God:

36 Beck, *Unclean*, 27–28. These four principles are *Contact* (contamination is “caused” by direct physical contact, spatial proximity, similarity, or association); *Dose Insensitivity* (contamination occurs regardless of the amount of the pollutant or the duration of contact/proximity); *Permanence* (contamination is irreversible; once something is ruined it cannot ultimately be restored to its original state); and *Negativity Dominance* (contaminants have more power to defile than pure objects can resist). All four principles illustrate the applicability of the proverb “Him little but him tallawah” (in the title of this paper) to the dynamics of “dirt” and disgust.

37 In the United States these “one drop rules” were the basis for the discriminatory regulations that sustained Jim Crow prohibitions and anti-miscegenation laws, the last of which were overturned as late as 1967 with the Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia*. Nevertheless, the spirit of these laws is still in wide circulation, sustained by unexplored assumptions about racial purity, the logic of contamination, and sociomoral notions regarding clean and unclean, which are encoded in dominant cultural institutions. A ballot referendum in November 2000 to remove language in the Alabama State Constitution barring interracial marriage won with only 59% support. Apparently 41% of voters felt the language should remain. The prevalence of colorism in the Caribbean is part of this legacy, a legacy that reaches back to colonial influences on both American and Caribbean societies.

I don't have prejudice against meself. My father is a white, and my mother black. Now them call me half-caste, or whatever. Well, me don't deh pon nobody's side. Me don't deh pon the black man's side nor the white man's side. Me deh pon God's side, the Man who create me; who cause me to come from black and white.³⁸

Marley's observations could almost be a summary of what the Spirit is sent to tell Peter in Acts 10.

Peter, Cornelius, Food, and Filth

The principles and dynamics above provide us with some powerful conceptual tools for thinking about Acts 10 and the identity and work of the Spirit.

We find all three disgust domains interrelated in the Acts 10 narrative—there is the Core Disgust of food (unclean food), the Sociomoral Disgust of socializing and eating with a gentile (unclean person/house), and the Animal Reminder disgust of realizing that the security and significance conferred by Peter's cultural narrative is being challenged and expanded to include threatening elements (not only is he socializing with a gentile, but that gentile is a conduit for God's word to Peter, whereas he had assumed the dynamic would run the other way around). Peter is the Apostle after all, not Cornelius. But in this narrative that is not so clear.

In this narrative the Holy Spirit is, ultimately, the Apostle, bringing to Peter a very strange and difficult teaching indeed. Jesus's disciples had complained that his teaching regarding his death and resurrection was difficult; but this teaching of the Spirit may be at least as difficult to receive, if not more so. The teaching of the Spirit suggests that Peter's identity has been rooted in a narrative that was not wide enough for God's grace, and this teaching asserts that any story that secures one's identity by deeming another person sociomorally unclean is incompatible with the work of Jesus and the ongoing ministry of the Spirit.

Peter's narrative identity, once based on boundary markers revolving around clean and unclean foods *and persons*, is about to become creolized—two languages, ethnicities, and two histories will now be carriers of God's work of reconciliation. Before there was only one. The singular and pure now becomes plural and, in Peter's mind—at least initially—polluted. But the Spirit asserts otherwise. This particular kind of syncretism can be sanctified. In the face of Peter's "Surely not," the Spirit says "Yes, indeed."

From this point on both the narrative of Peter and that of Cornelius will be forever intertwined, their identities "mixed," their classification systems modified from the ground up. They cannot tell their personal stories without reference to

38 Kevin Macdonald, "Marley" (Magnolia Pictures, 2012).

one another; and they cannot tell the Christian story with integrity while ignoring the identity and voice of the other.

Let's look at a few critical scenes in the narrative of Acts 10 with regard to disgust psychology, and then move on to some theological reflection implied by this narrative.

The Revolution Descending on a Sheet (10:9–16)

This narrative involves two God-fearing men; two prayers; two visions (with Peter's set in an apocalyptic context); two angelic directives; and two very different social locations and identities—one a gentile and the other a Jew. Their moral worlds, with regard to the categories of clean and unclean, could not be further apart, even though Luke paints Cornelius as a mediating figure between paganism and Judaism.³⁹ Those moral worlds are about to collide due to divine initiative. This fact is highlighted in the story by Luke's characterization of Cornelius as a person who is as close to the kingdom as a gentile could be—except that he's a gentile. And what makes him a gentile is also what makes him a threat to Peter as a Jew. They inhabit moral orders constructed upon notions of clean and unclean that make the one a source of contamination for the other. The issue of moral boundaries is directly addressed in Peter's vision.

A sheet descends; it is a bounded space. And "in" that space is contained "all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air" (Acts 10:12). The spatial metaphor is important here, for it plays a significant role in determining Peter's forceful and negative response. Since the sheet contained clean as well as unclean food options (reptiles are mentioned, which are unclean for food purposes), Peter could have fulfilled the command to "kill and eat" by selecting the clean animals for consumption and ignoring the unclean.

However, Peter may have assumed that all the animals on the sheet were rendered unclean due to the fact that they shared the same bounded space and were, consequently, in close enough proximity to one another for cross-contamination to take place.⁴⁰ The principle of contamination through contact and proximity might be applicable here, as well as magical thinking. According to these principles, and this logic, the entire sheet was, in effect, filled with unclean food. But even if Peter did not think that the unclean animals automatically contaminated the clean ones, the command to kill and eat all the sorts of animals in the sheet (including unclean ones) would have come to him as God asking him to do some-

39 Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 340 n. 46.

40 This point, however, is not self-evident, since Jews regularly used some unclean animals, such as donkeys (and even camels) as beasts of burden, and did not regard proximity to these animals as contaminating them.

thing “frowzy,” which would have thereby undermined the moral order within which he understood his identity as a Jew.⁴¹

So, Peter replies in verse 14 “By no means, Lord.”⁴² And he adds, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” Peter initially thinks that this is an exchange around the oral incorporation of food and Core Disgust domains. But the reply Peter receives draws upon the categories of clean and unclean in their broadest sense, applying them beyond food to *persons*. Food is simply triggering stimuli for the real issue at stake in Peter’s dream—the domains of sociomoral and animal reminder disgust, which are keeping apart two people that God’s work has joined together.

The heavenly voice asserts: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (v. 15). And if all these things are clean, there is no longer any reason for some of them to be quarantined from one another. Purity metaphors, contamination principles, and disgust dynamics are clearly at work here.⁴³ As Beverly Gaventa rightly perceives, “What is at issue between Peter and the heavenly voice is not Peter’s luncheon menu but the way he applies the terms ‘profane’ and ‘unclean.’ The subject is not his practice [of eating], but his assumption that he knows what is clean and what is unclean.”⁴⁴ It turns out that Peter’s assumptions about the content of these social categories, and the *telos* towards which they direct his actions, cannot be reconciled with his confession that Jesus is Lord of all. That is about to be rectified.

The power of disgust to demarcate boundaries and expel potential contaminants is likely the reason why Peter, when confronted by the vision of the sheet, has to be commanded to eat “three times” (v. 16). Only then does the narrative transition to Peter’s internal “wondering about the meaning of the vision” (v.17) and his

41 “Frowzy” is Jamaican patois used to describe something disgusting; particularly an offensive body odor. It is used to insult and shame the offending person into cleaning up in order to remove the offensive odor. An equivalent Trinidadian phrase might be “Yuh smell like a bag of ol’ puttigal,” or when the offending smell is mixed in with the smell of soap or perfume one would refer to the resulting odor as “stink-a-sweet.” Either way, generating an offensive smell renders one an object of disgust and shame, and thus to be either cleaned up or avoided in order to reinforce normative social categories.

42 Ben Witherington explains that this phrase “is found nowhere else in the NT except in the parallel account in Acts 11:8, but in both the LXX and in secular texts it indicates a very strong negative reply.” See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 349 n. 94. The emotional context of this “strong negative reply” is derived from disgust and its attending dynamics.

43 Given that Peter’s reply is triggered by a command having to do with the oral incorporation of (contaminated) food, it seems highly likely that the dynamics of disgust psychology are shaping his perceptions and actions and will continue to do so throughout the narrative, as he moves from the domain of Core Disgust in this episode, to the domains of sociomoral and animal reminder disgust later in the narrative.

44 Gaventa, *Acts*, 166.

“thinking about the vision” (v. 19).⁴⁵ Peter has been given some serious food for thought, with radical implications for his identity as a Jew and a Christian. How he resolves the psychological disequilibrium that has just been introduced into his life will be critical to the integrity of the message of Jesus, the work of the Spirit, the demographics of the Christian community, and the embodiment of social justice.⁴⁶

Peter's Rationalization (10:27–29)

Where there is a breach in a moral order, there is a rationalization nearby, and that rationalization is provided in verses 27–29.⁴⁷ Peter, upon his arrival at Cornelius's house, feels it necessary to make explicit the assumptions that undergird his existing moral order and why he is about to violate those norms: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.”⁴⁸

Peter, though “wondering” and “thinking” about a vision/command that has been presented to him three times, is now clear about its meaning.⁴⁹ He is no longer at liberty, as a follower of Jesus, to define what is clean and unclean strictly by reference to social habit and cultural tradition. These critical social categories are instead to be filled with content by “Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (v. 37). Which in turn implies a radical social reorganization where God can no longer be used to justify any kind of “favoritism” legitimated on the basis of some persons

45 This threefold exhortation may also be a reference to Peter's earlier failed test when asked if he was associated with Jesus. Not only did he deny Jesus three times (Matt 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62), but Jesus had to ask him three times if he loved him (John 21:15–19). Will Peter pass this second test of faithfulness to his Lord?

46 Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on Acts, notes that the command given to Peter to “kill and eat” should be “read first communally before it may be read consumptively”. Jennings, *Acts*, 107. As such, the command to Peter is more than a command to eat something Peter finds disgusting. It is also and at the same time a command to enter into a moral order represented by unclean animals and the people who consume them. Again, all three disgust domains are implicated in the command to kill and eat when read in this fashion. Jennings continues: “Peter is not being asked to possess as much as he is being asked to enter in, to become through eating a part of something that he did not imagine himself a part of before the eating.” The dynamics of the Eucharist are precisely the same.

47 On rationalization and moral orders, see Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 12–13.

48 It was, in fact, not against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with or visit a gentile. They could do so if they were willing to pay the social price of being made ritually unclean. The contamination principles of proximity and contact are operative here. But to say such associations are “against our law” is a bit strong, reflecting perhaps the psychological force on Peter of what is essentially a cultural taboo, not a religious law. See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 353.

49 I find such a fundamental realignment of Peter's moral vision to be a miracle in itself, particularly since human psychology and disgust triggers are rarely undone or reassigned in such an immediate fashion, regardless of the power of a singular experience. These triggers would have been assigned early in Peter's life during the promiscuous and developmental stage of disgust formation and as such would have taken immense effort and time to be reassigned.

being clean and some unclean (v. 34). These conclusions are then directly connected to, not only the vision, but one of the more developed and lengthy presentations of the life and ministry of Jesus in New Testament preaching (vv. 34–43). The work of the Spirit, in the dream and in the baptism that is to come, is explicitly set in the context of the work of Jesus—his own baptism by the Spirit, his healings, his undoing of the work of the devil, his resurrection, and his offer of forgiveness of sins to all. The baptism that the Spirit is about to confer upon Cornelius and his entire household is a continuation of this trajectory, generating a critical social manifestation of the kingdom of God: “peace” or shalom between persons (v. 36). The embodiment of peace or shalom must certainly be the primary reason behind Peter’s claim that Jesus “went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (v. 38), making the *telos* of the actions of “healing and doing good” fundamental to Jesus’ mission of forgiving sin—something that kept people “under the power of the devil.” Understood in this light, the “power of the devil” is deeply connected to the power of a social order to classify some persons as clean and some as unclean (Sociomoral Disgust), and to root the security and significance of human persons in socio-cultural groupings that are constructed and bounded by these categories, with no transcendent reference to relativize them (Animal-Reminder Disgust).⁵⁰

The Unilateral Baptism of the Spirit (10:44–48)

Although Luke portrays Cornelius as a mediating figure between paganism and Judaism, and thus as a special category of person perhaps deserving of the attention of God, the Spirit nevertheless baptizes his entire household, a household that would no doubt be characterized by mixed forms of piety. This “indiscriminate” act signals that the Spirit is willing to go even further than the God-fearing, pious, socially powerful gentile Cornelius in order to demonstrate the radical hospitality of the kingdom of God. Peter claims that he has learned from his visions that “God does not show favoritism” (v. 34) but the Spirit is about to show him the full extent of what that entails by interrupting Peter’s presentation and getting on with the main event. It has clearly been the Spirit’s show from the beginning, and the point of the entire narrative is brought home in a dramatic fashion. The Spirit cleanses all in the house, down to the very bottom, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. No wonder the circumcised in Peter’s entourage were “astounded” (v.

50 Paul’s language regarding the principalities and powers seems applicable here. Instead of making the social structures generated by the principalities and powers ultimate (the categories of clean and unclean being among them), we are instead to make Jesus the ultimate anchor for our security and significance because he is “Lord of all.”

45), perhaps even some were disgusted at the sight of this gentile Pentecost.⁵¹ To hear God being praised in a language foreign to one's own (particularly given the way in which Jews understood their special role in God's plans) can be threatening, and to hear it strange speech coming from unclean persons and being directed to a holy God must have been overwhelming. With the Spirit's action there was no longer any room left to leverage the sociomoral categories of clean and unclean to anyone's advantage. In terms of Animal-Reminder Disgust, there was no more room for the Jews or the gentiles in this story to see the other as a mortal threat to their security and significance. Those essential human needs were now rooted, not in social classifications that revolved around clean and unclean, but theological classifications having to do with the lordship of the resurrected Christ over all persons.

Peter, puzzled and confused days earlier by his dream, knows exactly what to do. The baptism of the Spirit, the incorporation of these gentiles into the people of God, must be followed by baptism with water in the name of Jesus Christ—itself an act of symbolic cleansing that follows upon the cleansing action of the Spirit, which itself follows from the fact that, ontologically speaking, God had never created the gentiles unclean in the first place. Creation is being restored through Spirit baptism—through undermining a social classification system that stood in opposition to the work of Christ. Reconciliation between the domains of core, sociomoral, and animal reminder disgust flickers to the surface with an offer of hospitality—"they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days" (48). The shared food, the shared social contact, the shared identities (they are all now believers) bear witness to the radical hospitality of the Father, Son, and Spirit.⁵²

Fallout in Jerusalem (11:1–3)

But an account has to be given for this breach of the Jewish moral order (word gets

51 In contrast to the negativity dominance and dose insensitivity principles of contagion, both Jesus and the Spirit are not contaminated through contact with the unclean. Instead, they cleanse the unclean, and in that sense reverse the logic of these two principles. The Spirit is not defiled by the unclean gentiles in Cornelius's house, but rather cleanses them all due to a kind of "positivity dominance." In this way the proverb "Him little but him tallawah" (in the essay title) applies not only to categories of uncleanness, but also (even more so) to the work of the Spirit, who is able to overcome our distorted categories.

52 Ben Witherington notes that such a gathering suggests, not an occasional community, but the existence of a house church where these kinds of ritual practices would generate a sustained social witness to the *telos* of the Gospel. See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 361. Witherington also notes that the sharing of food constitutes "the final proof that all reservations about these matters had been left behind Peter." Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 360. Given the powerful and promiscuous nature of disgust, I'm skeptical. Surely Peter continued to struggle with these deeply ingrained emotional and social habits, the incident in Antioch being the most obvious instance (Gal 2:11–14). But a critical trajectory had been established for the Christian community, and to struggle along that continuum, and toward its ultimate goal, is a perfectly appropriate manifestation of being sanctified, both individually and socially, in the Spirit.

around when social violations like this take place, particularly when authoritative figures are involved). It has to be explained theologically and translated into ethical practices that will 1. reinforce the new classification system, 2. bound the new moral order in concrete ways, and 3. direct the subsequent actions of the Christian community toward the *telos* of the kingdom of God unveiled at Cornelius's house. Some contextual theological reflection on the praxis of the Spirit in Caesarea has to occur in Jerusalem.

Peter is criticized by "the circumcised believers" (11:3), no doubt because of his sustained violation of the moral boundaries, which were generated by defining the gentiles as unclean and the Jewish believers as clean. Again, this is not simply a sociomoral threat. Such threats are easily dealt with by following accepted rules for cleansing oneself of sociomoral contamination. Either stay away from gentiles, or if you make contact, purify yourself. There's something more radical going on here in Jerusalem, and I think it has to do with the Animal-Reminder Disgust domain. If the gentiles are equal members in the kingdom of God, what then of the significance of one's Jewish identity and its attendant practices? Will these new believers have to be circumcised? Upon what basis is the Jew now secure with regard to their role in divine history? Those are terrifying thoughts—reminders of one's radical fragility and mortality, and they are familiar to any Jew who knows about exile. The gentile had never been an existential threat like that before. Now, with the baptism of the Spirit, things have changed. If Jesus is the ultimate basis for our security and significance, then what is the value of our history and heritage? These questions are not entertained in any explicit detail in Acts 11:18, but they are likely behind the concern and criticism Peter encounters upon his return from Caesarea if the psychology of disgust offers any light on this narrative. But for now, it is enough to tell the story (yet again) of Peter's dream and the baptism of Cornelius's house, with the result being that those hearing Peter "had no further objections" (11:18). Peter must have been a very good storyteller indeed for this socially and psychologically messy narrative to generate such clear consensus. But, social relationships and cultural change never function like this, even in small communities, so it is no surprise that we find the very same issues and concerns on the table just a few chapters later in Acts 15.

The Father, Son, and the (Holy) Spirit

We need to remember that the identity of the Spirit is more tied to the identity and work of the Father and the Son than our pre-existing notions of what is holy or profane, pure or polluted. That is critical in this narrative. With the baptism of the Spirit in this narrative the Holy Spirit is extending and fulfilling work initiated by the Father and secured by the Son, and that work seems to have significant import for how we negotiate the sociomoral and animal reminder disgust domains. Once

the Spirit baptizes Cornelius's house Peter loses any theological permission to look upon a gentile as a pollutant outside the radical hospitality of the kingdom of God. This is simply an extension of the ministry of Jesus, and a fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the Spirit Jesus sends will lead the fledgling Christian community "into all truth". That truth, in this narrative, is that no person should ever be categorized as "unclean" and treated as an object of disgust or contamination beyond the embrace of the Father, Son, and Spirit or the hospitality of the Christian community.

The events in Acts 10 are followed by the contextual theological work in Acts 15; work which is then encapsulated in Paul's disruptive words in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." On the surface this statement is radical enough, but its implications for how the categories of clean and unclean are used to legitimate social hierarchies and injustices are more radical still. There's an eschatological vision here that is made possible because new rules about the clean and the unclean have been put in place, newly aligned and orientated towards the reality that Jesus is Lord of all.

Which is to say that there's a trajectory here, implicit in the creative work of the Father, the redemptive work of the Son, and the perfecting work of the Spirit—a trajectory that originates in a Garden and that will find its fullest realization in a kingdom that is to come, foretastes of which we are granted in the present when we experience joy, peace, justice, and flourishing. Progress along this trajectory, at least according to the narrative we've considered here, requires that we designate as "clean" people and things that we have previously been taught to label "unclean" for the purposes of maintaining a moral order that makes our particular group feel safe and significant.

With the angelic declaration "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15), the baptism of the Spirit falling upon Cornelius's house (Acts 10:44–46), and the Jerusalem Council's removal of circumcision as a boundary marker for inclusion in the Christian community (Acts 15) I think we can say, by extension, that other sociomoral boundary markers that have been historically used as disgust triggers have also been relativized and "made clean" by God through the work of the Son⁵³ and the action of the Spirit—race, ethnicity, gender, color, class, sexual orientation. By so doing the Spirit carries out its perfecting work of radical hospitality, making all things new by generating an entirely different classification system as the basis for the Christian and the human

53 Ben Witherington notes that there was a Jewish tradition that taught that "when the Messiah came, all the animals in the world previously considered unclean would be declared clean (Midrash PS. 146/4 [268]). A beautiful thought, and theologically aligned with the argument of this essay. See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 350.

community, one that will sustain the social embodiment of the kingdom of God as a community of justice and shalom.

What might all this entail for the church in the Caribbean today? I'll venture only two brief suggestions.⁵⁴ The brevity is primarily due to a lack of space, but also to the fact that I do not have a thick feel for how these suggestions might play out in the complex social dynamics that attend to any social group, especially those with which I have not had sustained, immersive contact. But, I have been explicitly told by a Jamaican friend not to disqualify myself as a foreigner, and then "leave us with all the hard work to do." Let's consider how the argument above might be brought to bear on a couple of issues identified as important by those directly working with the church in the Caribbean (specifically Jamaica) today.⁵⁵

Conclusion: Redrawing Moral Boundaries

Patois and Reggae as Vehicles of Worship

The categories of clean and unclean are part of a larger classification system called language—the components and rules of which constitute the DNA of a cultural system. In both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago English is the national language, but it is an English in two forms: "standard" English and patois/creole.⁵⁶ The two "languages" run alongside each other in day to day use where the words and pronunciations in standard English differ only in terms of pronunciation, and at other times where patois operates with a unique vocabulary and syntax all its own.⁵⁷ Though some consider one a language and the other a dialect, my experience in both Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, is that English and patois are distinct languages.

Regarding this distinct language Garnett Roper notes that the Caribbean

54 Those interested in the broad theological framework I bring to these contextual reflections can consult Eric G. Flett, "Dingolayin": Theological Notes for a Contextual Caribbean Theology," in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Middleton and Roper (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

55 I'll be drawing broadly upon essays written by David Pearson, Erica Campbell, Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton for these suggestions. See Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton, eds., *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

56 Two fantastic sources cataloging the English of Trinidad and Tobago are John Mendes, *Cote Ci Cote La: Trinidad and Tobago*, Second ed. (Trinidad: New Millenium, 1986) and Lise Winer, ed., *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad and Tobago* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

57 I recall my first trip to Trinidad with my wife and the isolation and strangeness I felt as she broke into patois upon meeting her sister. I could not understand a single word of their conversation. Once I picked up some patois of my own an insider status was conferred upon me that was not on offer when I spoke "standard" English. Language is a fundamental boundary marker for any moral order.

church “avoids using the vernacular and accent of the Caribbean in its liturgy.”⁵⁸ This avoidance suggests that patois is somehow inadequate or inappropriate as a vehicle for expressing not only one’s self-identity, but also for giving that self to God in worship. Those two goals can only be secured through the use of a form of English imposed upon the English-speaking Caribbean by colonial masters as a tool of domestication. According to Erica Campbell, and referencing the thought of Marcus Garvey, internalizing the language of a colonial master and then being forced to express the deepest part of one’s self through those categories generates a form of mental slavery: if I want to connect with myself, and with God, I have to use a language that is not my own and that I cannot inhabit intellectually or emotionally. The question with regard to liturgy then becomes how “people [can] sing from the heart that which they do not understand?”⁵⁹ This kind of distance between sign (language) and the thing signified (the interiority of the person) undermines genuine worship and, instead of worship resulting in the empowerment of the human person through the worship of God it instead undermines the human person as a creature made in the image of God. Similar sensibilities are shared by David Pearson when he notes that “the average Jamaican evangelical church today trumpets its praise through the strains and strings of North America. That which is local is often ridiculed as being at least inferior and as best demonic.”⁶⁰

“That which is local is often ridiculed as being at least inferior and at best demonic.” Why is that? And can this posture toward the local, whether in language, music, art, or other cultural forms, be sustained given the argument presented in this essay? I think not.

The stigmatization of the “local” in the Christian church is, I believe, rooted in an inadequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit (among other things) and a dualistic doctrine of creation and culture that understands the church as a clean and pure space that can be contaminated by unclean or worldly forms.⁶¹ Patois, reggae, calypso, and the steel drum are seen as contaminants according to this categorization, such that allowing even small experiments with these local forms will pol-

58 Garnett Roper, “The Caribbean as the City of God: Prophetic Possibilities for an Exilic People,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Roper and Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 7.

59 Erica Campbell, “Language and Identity in Caribbean Theology,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Roper and Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 28.

60 David Pearson, “Jesus’ Healing of the Paralytic: Luke 5:17–26 and the Jamaican Church,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Roper and Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 107.

61 A similar diagnosis, with reference to the hymnody used in the Jamaican church, is offered by J. Richard Middleton in his essay “Islands in the Sun: Overtures to a Caribbean Creation Theology,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue*, ed. Roper and Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 90–93.

lute a service of worship.⁶² The contamination principles of negativity dominance, permanence, and dose insensitivity seem operative here. Resistance to these forms in the church suggests that welcoming them into the church is to violate a moral boundary established by God and, as such, a boundary that must be upheld by those who worship that God. If not, sociomoral contamination will take place and the worship offered will not be acceptable to God. I'm not sure I see the difference between this logic and that of Peter in Acts *before* he is presented with his heavenly vision.

If God has in fact made all things clean, and that includes both animals and gentiles, then why would cultural forms be excluded from this sanctifying work?

In addition, resisting and stigmatizing the local causes the Spirit to groan and creation along with it, if that Spirit has been sent to translucently incorporate the particularities of the created world for the worship of God. It seems clear that this was the primary mission of the Spirit in Acts 10. What Peter may have viewed as syncretism (joining together the particularities of the Jew and the gentile into a single story) the Spirit instead presents as a necessary step in the sanctification of creation that generates shalom, flourishing, and the kingdom of God.

Local particularities, and a variety of them, seem to align with the fact that God reveals himself through the particularities of a first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus, and through the interaction of the human creature with the created order. These interactions ought to produce plurality, not homogeneity; and plurality, whether racial, ethnic, economic, or musical, is not what one experiences in many Christian churches, wherever one goes. One has to ask then whether the Spirit sent by the Father through the Son is always the one leading us in worship if local cultural forms and particularities of language, music, food, etc. are not employed in the worship of the God who sent this Spirit.

The Poor as Vulnerable Witness to a Vulnerable God

A second, and connected, observation relates to the fact that local forms are stigmatized because they are *associated with particular groups of people*—the poor, uneducated, weak, and vulnerable. That is a significant theological problem for the church, and evidence of its captivity to a moral order that cannot be justified by recourse the Gospel of Christ. Whereas in the previous point we were dealing primarily with the Sociomoral Disgust domain, I think here we enter the Animal-Reminder domain. Why?

Recall that Animal-Reminder Disgust is triggered when specific stimuli re-

62 A Jamaican friend who works with a number of Jamaican churches commented that patios and reggae are stigmatized primarily because they are associated with the poor, marginalized, and uneducated, and that patois in particular ought not be encouraged because it there is no place for it in the broader power structures of a global culture. Neither one of these arguments is theological in nature.

mind us of our fragility, mortality, and death. Human persons tend to structure their moral worlds in such a way where these reminders are minimized or strictly controlled, if not rendered completely invisible. This can be done in terms of the physical spaces we regularly occupy, the ritual behaviors we engage in, and the worldview assumptions we hold. Peter would never have gone into Cornelius's house, shared food with him, or entertained the notion that Cornelius was a co-participant in the mission of God if not for the angelic visitation he received and the Spirit-baptism of the gentiles he witnessed. He was insulated, and in that insulation, he occupied a moral order where he was secure and significant, not vulnerable, weak, or fragile, and certainly not in danger of death—whether physical or symbolic. He was a circumcised Jew with a history, identity, and destiny unlike anyone else, and as such someone who could negotiate the world with a great sense of security and significance.

Until he fell into a trance. Until he heard a voice declaring “clean” that which he found disgusting. Until he went to Cornelius's house. Until the Spirit baptized a room full of gentiles without asking him first. When Peter returned to Jerusalem the circumcised believers demanded an explanation because their history, identity, and destiny were directly threatened by these happenings. They had to face their own vulnerability, fragility, and symbolic mortality in order to acknowledge this unfolding of God's work, work that folded the histories, identities, practices and sensibilities of the gentiles into the story of Israel's election.

David Pearson notes the foothold that the message of prosperity theology has taken in some branches of the Jamaican church, particularly the Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions.⁶³ Such a message generates a moral world where reminders of vulnerability, weakness, and brokenness are seen, not as a witness to the vulnerable God of Jesus Christ nor the humanity made in his image, but as threats to an ecclesial order structured around power, invulnerability, and social prestige. What room could there possibly be in a moral order like this for the destitute, disadvantaged, and stigmatized? The very community that is to embrace them in the name of Christ, and care for them as if caring for Christ himself, is instead disgusted and threatened by their vulnerability, expelling them from the community until their souls are saved, their habits are changed, and they are otherwise cleaned-up and made respectable.

Jesus came to overcome death, not to deny it. He did this by going through death, and by so doing grounding the security and significance of human persons in a story where creatureliness, vulnerability, and mortality are features of a good creation. There has to be room in the moral order of the church, and the world at large, for those who bear witness to the vulnerability of God through the vulner-

63 Pearson, “Jesus' Healing of the Paralytic,” 104.

ability of the humanity God gave them. When the church is disgusted by such persons, they not only have no room for the poor in their moral worlds, but no room for the God who so intimately bound himself to them. And when the church finds itself disgusted by the God they call holy (because of this God's intimate identification with the poor) it cannot bear the witness required of it, and instead only bears witness to its own fears and cultural idolatries.