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 Texts: Genesis 3: 22-24; Matthew 12: 1-14; John 8: 2-11  
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### Against Purity (For Complexity)<sup>1</sup>

There is something that I have been turning over in my mind for a long time now, a tasty morsel of heresy that I cannot resist sharing with you. I am against purity.

You will, no doubt, wonder how a preacher can give voice to such a formulation. Is not the Bible a long chronicle of the quest for all manner of purity? Is purity not the aim of half or more of the laws given in the books of Moses? Is the desire for purity not to be found among certain of the Psalms? Does not the Apostle Paul counsel his readers to avoid impurities of body and soul throughout his letters? Does not Jesus himself bless the pure in heart? It is true, all of it. I make no denials. Nevertheless, I cannot rid myself of this heretofore unspoken conviction, which I now freely utter: I am against purity. Here I stand. I can do no other.

It is both fitting and appropriate to frame this conviction in the words of Martin Luther, borrowing from him a certain zest and a particular spirit, which I wish to enlist in my campaign against purity. For it was Luther, the bawdy, beer swilling former monk who has filled me with these secret thoughts of impurity. It is Luther who felt the scourge of purity, who chastened himself nightly for his many imagined failures. It is Luther who discovered a newfound freedom of the soul, and it is Luther who bequeathed us with the central insight of the Protestant Reformation: that as human beings we are “simil justus et peccator,” justified and sinners. We are angels with a capacity for beer, devils who know the hymns by heart, Saturday night and Sunday morning, woke and simultaneously snoring – all rolled up into one. I take my inspiration from Luther.

But I also borrow my form from him as well, for at his best, he argued using disputations, fragments, and short aphorisms. It is a form of speech that preachers too often neglect. And so we’ll proceed using an ancient form of address, one as venerable as the “95 Theses,” but one as modern as the printed manifesto. Both suggest a form for a discourse against purity.

A recent article furnishes our thesis: that while formal ties with religion have declined in America, Americans haven’t ceased being religious.<sup>2</sup> They are, in fact, more zealously religious for having shrugged off the trappings of doctrinal beliefs. The wellness industry, rigid adherence to partisan political platforms, the seductive lure of conspiracy theories, superhero narratives, campaign rallies that resemble religious revivals, the nearly evangelical connotation of the designation “woke”: religion hasn’t declined, nor has it gone away. It has merely altered itself.

Still with us as well is the religious quest for purity. Like Lady Macbeth scrubbing her hands, we scrub Instagram feeds and Facebook posts. We scrub public images, institutional identities,

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<sup>1</sup> With constant reference to Alexis Shotwell, whose book of the same name, *Against Purity*, is everywhere embedded within this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> See “America Without God,” by Shadi Hamid, *The Atlantic*, April 2021.

official utterances, everything, in order to remove blemishes that might otherwise testify against us, revealing a messy and conflictual past. We remove evidence of guilt, the spots upon our hands that attempt to speak through us.

The quest for purity shows up in other ways as well. Take a stroll through the skin care aisle of the nearest market. The more upscale, the better. Products promise to remove the toxins that seep into your skin throughout the day. What, precisely, is a toxin? How does it enter my body? Why is it important to remove it, to become purified of it? I do not know the answer to those questions, but they form the basis of an industry that would purify me of unseen pollutants seeping into my skin.

Food as a mechanism for achieving purity: diet fads, cleanses, ethical eating – these all appeal to a quasi-religious quest for purity. Beef that is grass fed, chickens that are free range, locally grown, non-GMO cereals, plant-based products, no artificial ingredients, loaded with antioxidants, gluten free, no sugar added, USDA certified organic, promotes detox, whole grain, kosher, Paleo, Keto, vegan – the designations proliferate, each of them signifiers of varying kinds and degrees of purity. Witness the Instagram feeds of health and wellness influencers. Deviations from food orthodoxies (read: purities) elicit howls of fury. Fundamentalism need not be church based to remain, at heart, fundamentalist. Purity is the through line connecting fundamentalists of all persuasions.

From a conversation I had about the Covid vaccine: “I’ve seen what’s in those medicines, and I don’t want that stuff in my body.” The body as a sealed off territory, which can be invaded from without by foreign elements, which rob it of its purity, its integrity, its perfection.

The body as a metaphor for the state: just as functional bodies require the membrane of the skin to keep unwanted elements from entering, so nations require strong borders to prevent them from being overrun by uninvited guests. Immigration policies transformed into codes for determining the racial and ethnic purity of nations. Violence against minorities as a means of achieving a purity that has been, for too long it is thought, deferred.

In the early 2000’s, as Mainline Christian denominations worked toward greater inclusion of the LGBTQ community, including the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, the rhetoric of purity was used to counter those efforts. Galatians was cited: “The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, etc.” Colossians too: Put to death whatever is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, and so on.” One denomination includes “purity” among the attributes it requires of ministers. Beware the uses of purity among religious authorities: when you hear it spoken of approvingly, it means that someone will shortly be shunned, punished, or expelled.

Conversely, purity remains an organizing principle behind irreligion, behind the so-called “new atheists” of the Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris variety. Enumerating the historical flaws of religion, listing religion’s complicities in racism, colonialism, homophobia, and sexism as an excuse to rid oneself, to purify oneself, of religion’s pervasive influence. To which we might respond: where shall we go where we shall not be confronted by ethical and moral binds of the sort we confront in Christianity? If we flee religion, then we must also flee America. If we flee America, we must also flee Europe. If we flee Europe, we must also flee language, for language

is the very tool by which oppressions take shape. Where shall we flee? If we take shelter within non-European, or indigenous traditions, what shall we do when we discover variants upon our own legacy of exclusions, rivalries, and violations? Do we not encounter the human stain wherever we might roam, among whomever we might sojourn? How far shall we be chased by a desire for purity?

A corollary: what happens when we are confronted with the knowledge that a town, a church, a region, participated and profited from slavery, and later from segregation? Does church membership decline for that knowledge? Do property values in that town plummet? To flee such a site: one manifestation of the quest for purity. To deny or repress such knowledge: another manifestation of the quest for purity. The wish to burn it all down and start again: still another drive toward purity. Is that very quest not an evasion of responsibility?

What happens when a family genealogy turns up evidence of slaveholding and slave trading, as it does for so many families in New England? What happens, to white families in particular, when evidence of bigotry is discovered in one's lineage? What do we do with the Confederates, Nazis, Bircher and Birthers rustling about down there in the family basement? Do we disown them, purifying ourselves of their presence by distancing on one hand, or ignoring on the other? What would it mean to try something different? What would it mean, as white families, to say "this too is a part of who I am."? Would our ethical commitments disappear? Or would they somehow deepen, as we embraced what it means to operate from a compromised space that is always already riddled with contradictions?

From an email I received in the summer of 2020: the Constitution is so riddled with flaws, its architects so tainted by racism, that it would be best to start over anew. From what possible ground could that "newness" be articulated? Would it not be similarly tainted? That email functioned as a mirror image of a conversation I once had more than a decade ago with a Tea Party Republican. "The government is so corrupt," she told me, "that it would be better to just form something entirely new." Both are expressions of a will toward an imaginary purity, where a tension that feels uninhabitable could be left behind.

There exists an unstated belief that it is more or less possible to find one's way back to Eden, back to some primordial state of innocence, back to the garden. Against that belief, I affirm the flaming swords that prevent such a return. I celebrate the toil that results from living east of Eden, for it is a celebration of the human.

In Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral*, we find the quintessential portrayal of the American quest for purity: a young woman, tortured by her own sense of culpability in the world, allows her own life to drain away through her renunciations: of human company, of nutrition, of light, of air. She drinks only a tepid form of broth, in order to avoid ingesting other living things. A bandana covers her mouth and nose, in order to avoid inhaling living microbes. Purity overwhelms her, such that it becomes more valuable even than life itself. She wastes away in a secluded apartment, the embodiment of one version of the American dream.

A statement overheard among young environmentalists: humans have so wrecked the planet that we probably won't even be here in 50 years. In fact, the speaker declared, we don't deserve to

be. Lurking immediately behind that statement is the drive toward purity. Having sullied the planet, humans are no longer worthy of it.

The ministry of Jesus as a principled stance against purity. Witness the stories of Matthew 12. In one, Jesus responds to the code enforcers with the following words: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For sacrifice, substitute purity and you'll get the gist of his meaning. In another, Jesus transgresses a purity code by coming into contact with a disfigured man. "Reach out your hand," Jesus tells him. A question: is the healing that the man experiences primarily physical? Or is it a healing of a ruptured social world? Either way, one who had been shunned receives an invitation: stretch out your hand.

Stretch out your hand: is that not the essence of an ethic that is against purity? Stretch out your hand, and I will take it, because I don't need to be protected from you, because I don't need to be separated from you, because my own sense of self doesn't depend upon overt or covert drives for purity. Stretch out your hand and I'll take it, because in every way that matters, I face the same things that you do, fear the same things that you do, need the same things that you do. Stretch out your hand.

Mercy, not purity. That is the meaning of another famous story about Jesus, when a woman is brought to Jesus after being caught making love to a man other than her husband. The enforcers of the purity codes wish to cancel her account in the old-fashioned way: with stones. Jesus cancels their accounts: with mercy. Let he who is without blemish cast the first stone, Jesus tells the accusers. They slink away, and Jesus offers no condemnation of the woman. None whatsoever.

It's true that public figures and political leaders must be held responsible for their words and deeds. Matt Lauer, Harvey Weinstein, the former President, the QAnon congresswoman, the silken Senators who winked and fisted their encouragement to insurrectionists: these are individuals unfit for positions of leadership. The demand for responsibility is not to be equated with a drive for purity. It is a call toward complicated moral reckonings that refuse easy disavowals, chirpy innocence, or protests that "I just didn't know." To be against purity is not to be against justice. It is, rather, to answer the call of justice, where the purveyors of purity are forced to reckon with their own deep complicity. That is the further meaning of the story of Jesus and the woman caught in the cross-hairs of purity.

Nor does being against purity mean being for environmental pollution, poisonous ingredients or harmful policies. To be against purity is not to throw up one's hands, is not to evade responsibility, is not to shrug, to resign, to simply live and let live. It is merely to say that there is no uncompromised ground on which to stand. It is to say that we enter the world having already been pre-polluted, our bodily environments having already been breached by chemicals, microbes, and germs. It is to say that we are born into complexity. It is to say that complexity and complicity are the constitutive situations of our existence, of life itself. It is to say that the desire for simplicity, for purity, as often as not masks a will toward non-being, toward death, which is the space of the simplest purity, and the purest simplicity.

In so saying, I take my stand not only with a certain Luther or a certain Jesus, but with a recent constellation of feminist philosophers: Anna Tsing, Alexis Shotwell, and Donna Haraway. They counsel us to stay with the trouble, encouraging us to live within the disturbance. To be alive is to live within the disturbance.<sup>3</sup> An ethics of purity is to deny, repress, or otherwise hide from the disturbance. It is to live in the kingdom of kitsch, which is the realm of the pure.

To stand against purity is to stand for complexity in a world of simple solutions. But it is also to stand for love itself. To be against purity in one's relational life is to insist that in order to be worthy of love, worthy of care, worthy of acceptance, it is not necessary to root out the imperfections and flaws of another. To be ourselves worthy of love, it is not necessary to achieve an imaginary purity. It is only necessary to be, in the fullness of our complicity, seeking to enlarge spaces for flourishing, even within the disturbance.

What I am trying to tell you is this: if religion today has simply gone underground and is being practiced by different means, and if it's true that we're going just a little bit out of our minds trying to achieve a purity that keeps on eluding us, then perhaps Luther's insights pertain to us, we who are driven no less than he by the regime of purity. His discovery was this: of a loving Presence beyond the purifying God, one who wished to confer upon us our freedom. A Presence who delivers mercy, not excoriation, who says to each and all: stretch out your hand. When we do, we find there the hand of another, touching us, loving us, liking us, even within the disturbance.

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<sup>3</sup> See Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). See especially the entirety of the introduction.