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Despite the overwhelming presence of evil in the world, it is incredibly rare to find people who will, in the moment, look at what they are doing and think that it is evil. Humans do not like to view themselves as evil, at least in ways that matter to them. In psychology, when there is a discrepancy between the way one sees themselves and the way they think they ought to be, this is called dissonance. The discrepancy between evil’s presence in the world and people’s perceptions of the moral value of their actions can be attributed to psychological defense mechanisms that humans have in place to prevent from feeling dissonance when they engage in self-serving or sinful actions.

Christians, both individually and collectively, are not exempt from these patterns of making excuses for themselves. Christians are far more likely to admit to being sinful as a general part of the sinful condition than they are to admit specific sins and wrongdoings. Church organizations far too often take years upon years to admit to historic wrongdoing, much less present damage done to the community around them. One of the most egregious examples of this in present day is how churches deal with persons of sexual orientations other than heterosexual (experiencing attraction exclusively to members of the binary opposite sex) and persons of gender identities other than cisgender (identifying with the same gender identity that one was assigned at birth based on their bodily characteristics). The church and its members all too often exclude and damage LGBTQ+ persons and communities and then make excuses for themselves about it. This can be seen both by way of looking at how moral disengagement works in psychology and at how theology describes the process of exclusion and other-izing.

**Discrimination of LGBT+ people by the Christian Church**
The Christian Church has long had a tumultuous relationship with the LGBT community. Even without looking at the LGBTQ+ community specifically, sexuality has long been a taboo topic among the church. Misunderstandings of Jesus’ command of “do not lust” have led many portions of the church to interpret that as “do not participate in, talk about, or admit to intentionally thinking about sexuality (unless you are in an acceptable marriage)”. Deviations from the Church’s sexual norms are viewed as repulsive and something that only degenerates and those “living in sin” do. Commands to the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament and echoed sentiments from the apostle Paul in the New Testament inform the part of these sexual norms that claim that homosexual sexual contact is sinful. The lack of any examples of non-heterosexual marriages in the biblical narrative have bolstered this viewpoint. The combination of a repulsed reaction to those who deviate from Church sexual norms and apparent biblical support has resulted in a longstanding view of same-sex sexual expression as sinful that went unchallenged for a long time.

Similarly, gender has also been a longstanding “given” in church teaching. Gender roles were an integral part of how society worked in the biblical age. Thus, the Bible has a lot of teachings that incorporate gender, and the Christian tradition has understandably seen gender as important. In the biblical age, one’s sex determined their social class. This system would fall apart if people born in the lower social class decided that they didn’t like their lot in life and decided to switch, so one’s gender assigned at birth stuck with them for life. Seeing this form of culture, combined with no clear examples of gender transitioning or individuals outside the gender binary (there does not seem to be a clear consensus to what the term eunuch refers to in Christian circles) have resulted in a “common sense” understanding of gender that is both immutable from birth, and the same thing as biological sex. This understanding is read into
bibal passages on gender and became commonplace in the church. Understanding gender as anything else has been met with bewilderment and defensiveness of “biblically based” beliefs.

As time has progressed and we have come into the present age, many of our understandings on the way the world works have changed. Our understanding of marriage has moved from an economic institution primarily concerned with producing heirs to a commitment to share in the life of someone you love for as long as both of you live. Likewise, our understanding of sexuality has changed from a personal decision based on the universal condition to the result of a fairly rigid orientation. Similarly, gender is now understood as a separate construct from biological sex, with biological sex referring to the buildup of one’s body and gender referring to components of their social, mental, and spiritual being. Persons who feel distress at the way their gender is recognized and/or perceived are understood as having gender dysphoria. These new understandings have challenged the way churches have understood things, not unlike how feminism challenged the way the church looked at the role of women. The response of the Church to these changes in understanding has varied between congregations, from uncritically accepting what the culture has told them about anything-goes sexuality, to crusading against the influence of culture in understanding anything about the world. Overall though, the majority of the Church has responded negatively towards the LGBTQ+ community. Even if we were to grant what many congregations believe and hold same-sex sexual contact as a sinful behavior, this does not justify the Church’s treatment of members of the LGBTQ+ community. This discrimination sometimes takes the form of socially ostracizing the person and letting them know that they are not welcome in the community of God. Sometimes it takes the form of barring LGBTQ+ persons from participating in certain positions, indicating that the church finds this individual to be either shameful or dangerous. One of the most infamous
examples of this discrimination is conversion “therapy”, a harmful process where they attempt to “cure” one of a deviation in sexual orientation or gender identity, often through the use of electric shocks. Given that love is a central teaching of the Bible, caring for the needy and downtrodden is a clear priority for God, and an emphasis is placed on understanding, it makes one wonder why such a group should so vehemently discriminate against a people group in need, especially when the Church is clearly capable of being consistent with these callings in other areas.

The Theory of Moral Disengagement

In psychology, there is an explanation for how people can in good conscience go against their principles. This is a theory on human nature called the theory of moral disengagement. Bandura (1999), the originator of the theory, describes it as the ways in which the mind morally justifies actions that it would normally deem immoral and unfit to carry out. This is something that happens in normally functioning humans, not just disturbed individuals or those with personality disorders. This theory states that when people morally disengage from how their behavior affects others, they do so by disengaging from one of the stages of injustice affecting people, those stages being the damaging action, the destructive effects of said action, or the victim who is hurt by said destructive effects.

One of the ways the mind goes about dealing with damaging action is to find a way to frame the action so it doesn’t seem immoral. This is commonly done by way of moral justification, euphemistic labeling, or palliative comparison. Moral justification is a when a person engages in justifying themselves and reframing the action as something morally good so that they feel good about their damaging action. Euphemistic labeling involves attributing a neutral or pleasant-sounding name to the damaging action being done and thus bypassing any
negative associations or thinking too hard about what the action actually is or does. Palliative comparison is when a damaging action is compared to a worse alternative perpetrated by someone else so that any negative feelings towards the original action seem petty and inconsequential by comparison.

Alternatively, some people disengage from the damaging action by trying to remove their sense of responsibility from said action. This is achieved by ways of either displacement of responsibility or diffusion of responsibility. Displacement of responsibility occurs when a person justifies their course of action by appealing to a figure of authority over them and claiming that they hold responsibility for the damaging action. Diffusion of responsibility occurs when a person looks at the damaging effects of actions as the responsibility of a system larger and crueller than themselves, and thus disregard their own role in the damage done.

Another way that people approach disengagement from damaging actions is to disengage from the effects that their actions have brought about. This takes the form of minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences of the damaging actions. If one does not see the negative consequences that their actions have, then they won’t feel dissonance from committing said actions.

The final strategy of disengagement is to disengage from the victim and not look at them as worthy of sympathy or concern. One of the ways that this happens in by dehumanizing the victim. If people are viewed as less than human or even as evil, then it seems inconsequential to worry about how they are affected by one’s actions. Alternatively, one may place the blame of the damage on the victim. It is more difficult to see a person who brought the suffering they hurt upon themselves as worthy of sympathy. In this process, the perpetrators make themselves look like the victims who are really worthy of our attention.
Moral disengagement mechanisms are very powerful and effective. Examples of it can be seen all throughout history in cases of differing method and severity. After the Holocaust, many Nazi operatives could be seen displacing the responsibility for their crimes onto their authority figures. Abusers around the world commonly use the tactic of placing blame on the victim in order to live with themselves and keep their victims under their thumb. People who use illegal performance-enhancing drugs even use moral disengagement behaviors to justify their crimes (Boardley, Grix, & Dewar, 2014). With moral disengagement mechanisms seemingly a very ubiquitous part of how human beings operate, it’s very easy to see how the Church would pick this up in dealing with damaging behaviors that are fueled and made more ambiguous by religious teachings.

**Volf on Exclusion**

If we wanted to look at this from the theological angle rather than a strictly psychological angle, we will take a look at Miroslav Volf’s exploration of being distinct beings who have a tendency to harp on otherness and exclude, and how we go about reconciling and embracing each other (1996). Volf starts off his chapter on the subject of exclusion by noting that we have a habit of treating other people as sub-human in order to excuse any kind of atrocity we commit against them. Something that Volf notes that is not seen in Bandura’s theory, however, is the fact that his practice extends to a systemic level. Dehumanization does not just occur to help individual people cope with self-serving actions. Entire people groups and even ideologies prompt this pattern in people in order to further the narrative that one’s own group are the heroes of the narrative, spreading justice and progress in a world of chaos and evil. The specific example used is the ideology of modernity which both paints those who do not fall in line with
modern ideals as savages and dismisses and ignores the damage done to those exploited to advance the standing of the “champions of modernity” in the world.

Volf’s next move is to point out that people groups cannot point to these practices as being things that other people participate in and that they themselves are over. This directive prevents them from making the palliative comparisons seen in Bandura’s theory. Sin and evil is characteristic of the entire human race. To try to assert oneself as morally above the rest of a depraved world is to embody the same kind of aggressive self-justification that caused Jesus’ enemies to seek his crucifixion. The “righteous” actively try to seek out and destroy, repress, assimilate, or discredit anything that proves a threat to their own moral legitimacy.

When Volf goes into the main body of his chapter on exclusion, he defines it as “violently to reconfigure the pattern of [creation’s] interdependence, to put asunder what God has joined and join what God has put asunder” (Volf, 1996, p. 66). This process can take the form of either putting oneself outside the human web of interdependence and thus allowing one to dismiss the value of others. Alternatively, it can take the form of refusing to acknowledge what makes one distinct and instead attempting to assimilate them and remove them from the human web of interdependence.

Analysis of Church actions

We have established that the human race has a tendency to morally disengage from their worse behaviors so as to not view them as bad. We have explored how this process works through multiple lenses. Now I will apply the disengagement models to the situation of the Church in its relationship with the LGBTQ+ community.
First, we will look at methods of making damaging actions seem to not be a problem. The church has a history of using faith claims and tradition to justify damaging actions as being for a greater good. The crusades were a way of using “taking the holy land” to justify violent attempts at territorial expansion. The call to make disciples of all nations was perverted into an excuse for western powers to try to amass as many lands as they could for their empires. The Church made every attempt to justify social inequalities from Jim Crow era segregation to barring women from equal participation in the world. Falling in line with this pattern, the Church has glorified traditional views of marriage, gender, and sexuality, and have used the “defending of cherished biblical institutions” to make this new crusade against the LGBTQ+ community, cherished children of God, some kind of holy calling.

For examples of euphemistic labeling, look no further than the term “love the sinner, hate the sin”. The phrase sounds nice as it has the word love in it. On a conceptual level, it accurately describes how Christians should be interacting with all people. In practice however, for as well-intentioned as the Christian may be, what they considered to be the sin that they should hate is an irreducible characteristic of who the sinner they want to love is. As such, the term becomes a friendly sounding euphemism for keeping LGBTQ+ individuals at arm’s length and refusing to listen to them. Thus, the “love” they are showing the sinner is not the genuine love that they show to other people within their own circles. This can end up combining with moral justification in a nasty way. When the Christian becomes fixated on the attribute of the “sinner” that they find to be worthy of hate, they end up justifying the exclusion via assimilation seen in Volf by prioritizing the LGBTQ+ falling in line with gender and/or sexual norms rather than their personal well-being. The Christian’s “loving” the LGBTQ+ person becomes another word for trying to fix them by eliminating what makes them distinct. Since this unintentional
euphemism justifies the Christian’s damaging actions as being for the LGBTQ+ person’s own good, they end up not feeling any remorse for the harm they do.

Examples of palliative comparisons tend to come in two flavors in Christian culture. The first is characterizing the LGBTQ+ community as a den of sexual immorality and moral relativism. By playing up an unreasonable image of how disgusting and depraved LGBTQ+ individuals are, the ostracization of these individuals seems like a much greater good. The other variation of this practice is bringing up comparisons to worse cases of discrimination in order to dismiss their current actions as being not that bad. Sometimes the comparisons are drawn to extreme examples of any kind of discrimination, like treatment of Jews in the Holocaust or the American enslavement of black people, in an attempt to claim that “disapproving of their choices” is not nearly as bad as the atrocities of the past, and thus should not be considered in the same category. Alternatively, the comparison is drawn to more extreme cases of LGBTQ+ discrimination by other groups, like the notorious Westboro Baptist Church. This allows the person to attribute “real hatred” to other outgroups, and thus ignore their own problematic tendencies and continue on thinking that they are good Christians.

Given Christianity’s place as the world’s leading world religion, it is very easy for Christians to displace or diffuse the responsibility for harmful actions that they commit. Many Christians believe that repelling the LGBTQ+ community and its influence is a commandment they got from God, their highest authority. When they believe that their actions are ordained by God, they can deflect having to morally justify their actions as they were following the commands of a being that has the ultimate authority in the universe. Furthermore, as said being is believed to be ultimately good, they believe that nothing this being ordains or commands can be harmful or evil. The problem with looking at things from this angle is the fact that all the closest
things we can do to asking God for clarification on what he meant is to either consult Christian
history (which is heavily colored by sinful human history and therefore neither authoritative nor
perfectly good), interpret the Bible (which is an interpretation colored by our biases and
preconceived notions and therefore neither authoritative nor perfectly good), or ask God to reveal
their will through the Holy Spirit (a process of which there is no way to objectively differentiate
between divine revelation and sinful human intuition, and therefore is neither authoritative nor
perfectly good).

In cases where the Christian does come to realize that the LGBTQ+ community is being
mistreated by the church, they will still come to disengage themselves from the damage being
done by diffusing the responsibility among the community. They justify that because they have
nice intents towards LGBTQ+ persons, they aren’t the problem. The damage being done is being
done by overtly hateful people and the larger Christian system, they think, so why do we need to
critique my own actions. This applies to congregations and denominations, not just individuals.
In the similar situation of bullying, the bystanders tend to engage in moral disengagement
behaviors (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015). Likewise, when Christians see discriminatory
behavior in their peers, they also morally disengage. While ending the mistreatment of the
LGBTQ+ community may be seen as a worthy goal to strive for, it is not seen as something that
most Christians need to prioritize and is more seen as spiritual extra credit (not unlike caring for
the needy and other callings of Jesus that are oft ignored).

The practice of minimizing, ignoring, or misconstruing the consequences of damaging
actions is very commonplace among Christians. Similar to how parents have already rationalized
the use of physical punishment will ignore evidence that physical punishment has a negative
effect on children (Houwing, 2017), Christians who have already rationalized their actions
against the LGBTQ+ community as being sanctioned by God have a tendency to ignore any evidence to the contrary, like the hurt that LGBTQ+ individuals are suffering at Christian hands. They look at the theoretical consequences their actions should bring in their theology rather than the actual fruits their actions bear. It is not uncommon to hear Christians refer to LGBTQ+ people as “struggling with” same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria. While some LGBTQ+ Christians may indeed be struggling to come to terms with what it means to have a sexual orientation or gender identity that differs from the norms they have been taught, this explanation also gets applied to the distress that LGBTQ+ individuals feel from how they are treated by the Church. This misattribution of how LGBTQ+ individuals are suffering serves to make the victims, and not the church, the ones that need to change in order for the suffering to end.

The practice of dehumanizing LGBTQ+ individuals to justify their maltreatment is perhaps one of the most insidious practices Christians commonly use in this area. By lowering LGBTQ+ persons to a status of less than human, Christians can see LGBTQ+ persons as being exempt from our God-ordained call to show love, grace, and sympathy to our fellow humans. A similar process can be seen used to justify prisoner abuse (Weill & Haney, 2017). Certain translations of the bible use terms like detestable to describe same-sex sexual contact (Leviticus 18, NIV). Hearing this kind of vivid language used to describe a process that many Christians are unfamiliar with anyway causes Christians to paint a mental image that catastrophizes this action, making it seem like something immensely more repulsive and deviant than sins they are more familiar with. LGBTQ+ persons get associated with these actions regardless of if they have actually engaged in same-sex sexual contact ever, and as a result get portrayed as being disgusting abominations not worthy humane, much less Christian treatment. These dehumanizing views are protected by rejecting any ideology that affirms LGBTQ+ persons as nonsensical as
well as attempting to discredit those who affirm such views, be they allies or members of the LGBTQ+ community, as being too crazy, biased, or naive to be taken seriously. Some Christians, instead of portraying the victims of LGBTQ+ maltreatment as not deserving of human sympathy, take an alternative approach to dehumanization and instead do not look at there being a victim to their actions and ideas at all. Such Christians will, intentionally or not, keep the conversation in the realm of abstract theology and morality discussions in which human sinfulness can be used as a way to dismiss human experiences as being valid and worthy of consideration.

Victim blaming is also something that Christians engage in, even if unintentionally. Many church communities erroneously hold that being LGBTQ+ is somehow a choice. Thus, the suffering that they face for being LGBTQ+ in a heteronormative world is their own fault and their plight is not worthy of our pity. Even with Christians that do take LGBTQ+ individuals’ suffering seriously, they often see the reasons that they are hurting as being due to their own sin rather than a problem with the surrounding world. While their concern for the suffering is appreciable, blaming a person for discrimination against them is not helpful and bears the bad fruit of self-loathing in the LGBTQ+ individual and the bad fruit of exclusion by way of assimilation in the well-intentioned Christian.

Suggested solution strategies

Rather than leaving us simply stewing on the problem, I would like for us to try to find a way to address the exclusive divide between the LGBTQ+ community and the Church that results in reconciliation and embrace. The psychological theory only really gives us knowledge of where these thought processes start, and thus we can only really find ways to stop further damage, not to counteract damage done. Encouraging people to be aware of moral
disengagement processes, prioritize people over abstractions and group status, engage with LGBTQ+ persons where they are at rather than making them fit Christian norms, and intentionally listening to the stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ people would prove effective to some degree. Making sure that public church leaders and officials like pastor and elders actively try to counteract moral disengagement would spread the message more effectively than random Christians who have no religious authority. Heck, a clear stance against moral disengagement would help the church with its image problem in the world, as people notice and find it unethical when ideologies promote moral disengagement among their followers (Dang, Umphress, & Mitchell, 2017). Unfortunately, these methods require a prerequisite intentionality on the part of the Christian that psychology can’t give us.

**Volf on Embrace**

Turning to theology, we can find a more effective model for how to reconcile the Church with the LGBTQ+ community. I am not going to suggest some kind of miracle solution that clears up all confusion about what the Bible says about same-sex sexual expression or gender identity. People far more qualified than I have tried and failed. Rather, I am going to suggest that we take a look at Volf’s model of reconciliation that takes the form of embrace. This model respects the distinctiveness of all parties involved and ignores the damage done by exclusion nor perpetuates it by requiring assimilation. It shows what we are called to do to relate to others in the light of what Jesus has made possible for us to do. I am also going to look at how this model can be applied by the Church in relation to the LGBTQ+ community. While I understand that reconciliation requires work on the part of both parties, it will be more effective for the Church to worry about what they can do to contribute to reconciliation rather than try to dictate how the people that have been hurt by their interaction should go about interaction.
Volf’s model of embrace has four steps. The first step of this process is opening the arms. By opening one’s arms, one communicates that they have a desire to be connected to the other rather than isolated from them. This process inherently backs up this desire with more than just lip service. By opening one’s arms, one also creates a space where room is made for the other. A clear path is made for the other to partake in embrace and they are clearly invited to do so.

In practice, this would look like being clear in acknowledging that LGBTQ+ individuals are made in the image of God, and that the kingdom of God would be richer with them in it. This prevents Christians from engaging in dehumanization strategies. On a communal level, this step also involves the church acknowledging the legitimacy and dignity of LGBTQ+ identities instead of trying to erase what makes them distinct. Intentionally creating a space for LGBTQ+ people to engage with the church, and making it clear that this engagement is an embrace, not a battle or an indoctrination would do wonders for the Church’s relationship with the LGBTQ+ community.

The second step of Volf’s model of embrace is waiting. Waiting is what prevents the opening of the arms from becoming forcing oneself onto the other. By waiting, one indicates that they respect the other’s autonomy and distinctness enough to allow them the choice of whether they wish to participate in embrace or not. This act gives the embrace a newfound power in that it is reciprocal, a process that runs counter to the world of violence that we live in.

Waiting is not a state which the modern evangelical Church is very familiar with. The goal here is not to convert LGBTQ+ individuals to the correct form of Christianity, nor is it to take them into the Church’s reconciliation programs so that we can say that said programs were successful and check that off of our to-do list and conscience. Waiting allows the church to acknowledge the autonomy and dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals in getting to make this decision. It also is a sign that the Church is capable of acknowledging the damage it has done against the
LGBTQ+ community and respects that damage and them enough to ask for forgiveness rather than demand it.

The third stage of the embrace model is closing the arms. In this stage, both parties “enter the space of the other, feel the presence of the other in the self, and make its own presence felt.” (Volf, 1996, p. 143) This process requires a soft enough touch to ensure that it does not become an act of violence, and yet a firm enough resistance to keep from being assimilated oneself. Part of this process includes realizing that one does not already understand everything there is to know about the other and that they have a lot that they can learn from the other.

Central to this phase is its reciprocal nature. Thus, this phase is no more asking the church to just roll over to what the LGBTQ+ community wants any more than its asking the LGBTQ+ to shut up and be obediently molded by Christian tradition. Both communities have things that they can offer and teach the other. LGBTQ+ individuals who have tried to hold on to their faith in spite of maltreatment display an incredible fire for God that entire congregations lack. The church’s millennia-old history leaves them with countless resources and perspectives that could help LGBTQ+ youth grow into beings who not only reflect the qualities of Christ, but further his will on earth. The church being a community of support for LGBTQ+ individuals instead of a community of ridicule would help significantly with reducing suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youths. For all of the possibilities of this collaboration, the Church will have to keep in mind the distinct natures of the two communities. As the LGBTQ+ community includes non-Christians as well as Christians, there will be aspects of the LGBTQ+ community that the Church will not like just as there will be attributes of the church that the LGBTQ+ community will not like. Thus, the Church should avoid trying to get everyone in the LGBTQ+ community to fall in line with the Church’s brand of group thinking. On the flip side, this also means that the
Church should not just give up its ideals and take an anything goes approach to any kind of behavior. Believe it or not, it is possible to hold that same-sex sexual contact is sinful and still be respectful of those who are more inclined to desire it, whether or not they agree with you on your assessment of the behavior.

The final act of the embrace model is reopening the arms. This is to prevent the embrace from becoming a merger. Both parties in the embrace are distinct selves, and though the interaction has not left them the same as they were before the embrace, their individuality must be respected and given time to develop. This does not signify a definitive end to embrace, as since the arms are open, they invite future embrace when the time comes for it to happen again.

An important component of respecting the humanity of LGBTQ+ individuals is realizing that they are complex beings, and that there is more to them than being LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ people have other needs that are not just their sexuality. While the damage done to LGBTQ+ individuals by the Church is important and should be addressed, they cannot be really reconciled if they spend all their time as a project under a spotlight. Ultimately the church needs to be able to see LGBTQ+ people as people without using that as an excuse to ignore their LGBTQ+ status.

**Conclusion**

For all of its attempts to be the defenders of a sacred tradition from the corruption of the world’s sin, clearly reflects the sin of human nature in its exclusionary treatment of the LGBTQ+ community and its attempts to justify or ignore it. As ironic as that is, the answer is also not simply to abandon what makes Christianity distinct from this sinful world, but rather to follow in the example of Christ, and break the cycle of violence and exclusion with the power of embrace and reconciliation. This process does not take away from the church and make it reflect the sinful
world, but rather offers it the spiritual gifts that God has bestowed upon their LGBTQ+ children and the opportunity to more accurately reflect Christ.
References


