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# Shame as Obstacle or Opportunity? Pastoral Theologies of Shame

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## ABSTRACT

Within the contemporary theological world, pastoral theology is unique in offering a considerable variety of theological reflections on the phenomenon of shame. Pastoral theologians have called for the development of a theology that can be as liberating for those who suffer from shame as the theology of divine forgiveness has been for those who suffer from guilt. But their theological recommendations point in two directions: Is shame an obstacle to be removed, or (also) an opportunity to be embraced? This article offers a systematic overview of this growing area of research.

## KEYWORDS

Shame; pastoral care; theology; toxic shame; disgrace; discretion

## Introduction

For the past three decades, pastoral theology has become increasingly interested in the topic of shame. Beginning with American pastoral theologian John Patton's 1985 book *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*, the 1990s saw an increasing number of pastoral theological volumes dedicated to the study of shame.<sup>1</sup> After British pastoral theologian Stephen Pattison's well-researched and influential book *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (2000), the discourse around pastoral theology and shame has only continued to grow in various denominational and geographical directions.<sup>2</sup>

Almost unanimously, the pastoral theology of shame has combined a theological and a socio-psychological analysis. Traditionally, Christian theology has brought a liberating message of forgiveness from guilt. However, the more recent suggestion is that people do not (or no longer) suffer primarily from guilt and feelings of guilt; they suffer much more from shame. Therefore, pastoral theologians conclude, Christian theology needs to develop a language of soteriology that can address human shame in ways that are as liberating as the divine forgiveness discourse has been concerning guilt.

Though agreeing on that point, the various theologies of shame disagree with respect to the normative status of the phenomenon it investigates: Is shame to be seen as an *obstacle* for the good life, and therefore as something to be healed, encountered, and removed; or is shame (also) an *opportunity* for growth, insight, and relationality and therefore to be risked or even embraced under certain circumstances?

This article offers an overview of the pastoral theology and shame.<sup>3</sup> So far, only Stephen Pattison has attempted such an overview in his 2000 book.<sup>4</sup> However, theological research

into shame has only increased since Pattison's book, and the last two decades of development in the field should be addressed. My purpose with this article is not to develop a pastoral theological position on shame of my own. Rather, the article aims at establishing 'pastoral theology of shame' as a distinct field of research, one which not only has a set of shared assumptions but also ambiguities.<sup>5</sup>

The overview which I offer here, is systematic in three senses. First, regarding the field's core insights, I systematically refer to the most significant sources available in the field. This will give the reader a sense of the various shared—and disputed—assumptions. Second, I use the theological question of the normativity of shame as a hermeneutical lens through which I reflect upon the field.<sup>6</sup> Third, I focus on the specifically theological aspects of the field, approaching the topic in a systematic theological way. While pastoral theologians of shame offer excellent therapeutic advice (including the awareness of one's own shame as a pastor, and that church communities ought to organize in ways that offer more opportunities for facilitating healing), this article reconstructs the theologies that arise when pastoral theologians deal with the complexities of shame.

Besides pastoral theology, other types of theological inquiry have broached the topic of shame. One such type is missionary theology, which has pondered how to convey the Gospel to citizens of the Eastern 'cultures of shame.'<sup>7</sup> Another type is dogmatic theology, where protestant theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth have offered brief considerations of shame.<sup>8</sup> Only recently, contemporary theologians have followed suit.<sup>9</sup> Finally, liberation theology,<sup>10</sup> theological ethics,<sup>11</sup> and religious education discourse<sup>12</sup> have offered perspectives on shame, particularly as a sociological and cultural phenomenon. Liberation theology is particularly relevant for discussing the shame that can arise with social stigmatization of individuals or communities as unworthy, inferior, and dangerous. While I occasionally refer to some of these strands of theological research, my main focus is offering a concise overview of the *pastoral* theology of shame for which social approaches to shame remain marginal.

My argument begins with an analysis of the dominant narrative in the field and its grounding in psychological research. The next section investigates the theological proposals of those majority authors who argue to alleviate shame. Then, I explore the minority position that shame is largely an opportunity. Finally, I offer a few concluding remarks.

## How Pastoral Theology Problematizes Shame

As mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of pastoral theologians investigating shame propose a similar argument. The Christian theology of sin and grace has been developed to liberate people from guilt by preaching the message of divine forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> However, the focus on guilt may have caused Christian theology to overlook the extent to which people are actually suffering more from feelings of shame.<sup>14</sup>

This argument is grounded in a specific distinction between guilt and shame, a distinction that pastoral theologians find in a body of psychological literature on shame. This distinction suggests that guilt derives from *doing* wrong whereas shame arises on account of *being* wrong. In other words, guilt deals with discrete *acts*, while shame concerns the whole *person*. A comparable distinction between shame and guilt can also be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>15</sup> But pastoral theologians largely reference psychologists for the terms of the distinction.

## Shame and Guilt in Psychology

Building on Frantz Alexander's and Erik Erikson's work on shame, psychologist Gerhart Piers (1953) was the first to use neo-Freudian language to describe the difference between guilt and shame. Piers argues that guilt arises from transgressions against the superego. In contrast, shame implies a deficiency compared with the ego-ideal.<sup>16</sup> This distinction sets a trajectory which is followed by later authors, such as sociologist Helen Merrell Lynd (1958) and psychologist Helen Block Lewis (1971). Lewis suggests that shame focuses on the self as the doer of wrong especially in light of how the self appears before the eyes of others.<sup>17</sup> Psychologist Gershen Kaufman broadens the picture, explicating that shame occurs for reasons beyond that of guilt, for instance on account of begin victimized or not meeting standards of performance and aesthetics. In general, shame deals with inadequacy before any challenge, rather than only not living up to moral standards.<sup>18</sup> In other words, shame poses the question of whether I am of worthy of the respect, attention, and love of others.

Almost all the pastoral theologians rely explicitly on these sources for the distinction between guilt and shame (later, I return to the influence of Carl D. Schneider on pastoral theology).<sup>19</sup> Within the field, Donald Capps reaches a high point of pathos when proclaiming that theologies formulated in light of the question of guilt inflict 'conceptual violence'<sup>20</sup> upon those suffering from shame.

On the basis of this differentiation between guilt and shame, most pastoral theologians argue that, for pastors to be able to convey a message of liberation to their clients, the task of pastoral theology is to develop theological perspectives capable of addressing shame. However, one significant voice, Deborah Hunsinger, disagrees with this conclusion. Before proceeding with my main argument, I wish to take her proposal properly into account.

## Is Shame a Problem of Psychology, and Not Theology?

In *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*, Hunsinger argues that shame should be healed psychologically, while guilt and sin is a matter for theology. In her account, psychology and theology should exist as distinct disciplines with distinct areas of concern, although a pastor ought to be trained in both. The pastor should unite the two disciplines according to what Hunsinger, inspired by Karl Barth, calls 'the Chalcedonian pattern.' In the council of Chalcedon, it was stated that the one person of Jesus Christ unites the divine and human natures with neither separation nor confusion. Similarly, Hunsinger argues, the pastor should unite theology and psychology without separating them into two spheres, nor confusing their distinct functionalities.<sup>21</sup>

Hunsinger argues that psychology and theology provide distinct tools for distinct purposes. In so far as shame arises on account of *being victimized*, say in cases of sexual abuse, it requires a psychological approach. Inspired by Gershen Kaufmann, Hunsinger suggests that the pastor should work to restore the 'interpersonal bridge' that is destroyed when one has been humiliated and shamed by significant others. Only when the client has gained trust in the pastor, in oneself, and in the world, might the client be ready to focus on spiritual issues.

One's images of God, in Hunsinger's view, belong to the spiritual sphere. For example, one may have imaged God as a reflection of one's abusers, thus keeping the God of Jesus

Christ at arm's length.<sup>22</sup> Remaining unreconciled to the true God is sin, for which the proper response is confession and the reception of divine forgiveness. Such a topic would be the domain of theology.

Hunsinger is well aware that confessing one's sin before God may elicit shame in the client, that is, a *moral or even metaphysical shame* different from the shame of being victimized. However, Hunsinger follows Barth's view that God has, in some final way, already honored humankind with God's accepting presence amongst us in Jesus Christ (therefore, the human shame over one's sinfulness is always already overcome).<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned earlier, no pastoral theologian in the field follows Hunsinger in this Chalcedonian differentiation between psychology and theology.<sup>24</sup> But what is more surprising, no theologian in the field wrestles with her argument either.

This 1995 account of the relationship between shame and guilt by Hunsinger is susceptible to the criticism that it places theology within too narrow restraints by leaving the shame of victimhood—and other forms of shame, say the shame of experiencing oneself as insufficient before the ideals of oneself and society—to psychology. It has been a defining feature of much post-WWII theology that theology has to address not only sinners, but also victims. Johann Baptist Metz, for instance, argued that 'theology after Auschwitz' must include a theological take on theodicy.<sup>25</sup>

Later, Hunsinger undergoes a subtle development in her thinking about the ways in which the Gospel addresses the shame that derives from trauma and victimization. In her book *Bearing the Unbearable*, Hunsinger notes that trauma can result in shame, not least because of reactions to flashbacks, reactions that the traumatized person experiences as excessive.<sup>26</sup> This leads Hunsinger to develop the idea of the crucifixion as an offering of lamentation. Prayers of lamentation enable human beings to move from rage and shame towards mourning the loss.<sup>27</sup> Hunsinger writes: 'The cross of Jesus Christ is God's response not only to the guilt of human sin, but also to the terror and shame of human suffering.'<sup>28</sup> While this statement clearly constitutes a movement from her previous position, Hunsinger does not discuss its ramifications for her Chalcedonian methodology.

One way to develop the framework of the Chalcedonian metaphor would be to highlight the Lutheran insistence on the communication of attributes between the two natures of Christ, such that the suffering and death of the human person is also taken into the divine life without being itself divine.<sup>29</sup> Theology ought both to be informed by the psychological analysis of the human person, and to be able to help carry the burden of psychology, namely the burden of shame.

These later developments bring Hunsinger into the center of the field of pastoral theology of shame, whose basic aim is to discover a liberating Gospel for those who suffer from shame. I now turn to those pastoral theologians who conceive of shame as an obstruction to the good life, as something to be diminished, if not removed.

## Shame as an Obstacle to be Removed

The majority of pastoral theologians see shame primarily as an *obstacle* for the good life. To develop this point, some of them refer to the central distinction between the 'shame of discretion' and the 'shame of disgrace,' a distinction coined by theologian and psychologist Carl Schneider.<sup>30</sup> The 'shame of discretion' is a socially adaptive disposition that enables one to orient oneself in the social sphere. It entails a sense of boundaries, both a sense of

one's own boundaries and those of others. As such, it is forward-looking, aiding the person in avoiding situations that may stir the shame of disgrace in oneself and others.

Conversely, the 'shame of disgrace' is the immediately felt affect over having exposed oneself in unwanted ways before a real—or imagined—audience. The shame of disgrace involves unwanted bodily reactions, including blushing and hiding one's eyes from others. This form of shame is backwards-looking, focusing on the experienced devaluation in the eyes of others on account of the insufficiency in one's identity that has been exposed.

While some pastoral theologians note this distinction, they side-track the shame of discretion and focus primarily on the shame of disgrace.<sup>31</sup> Pastoral theologians focus on cases where the disgrace-shame lingers on to create a derogated sense of self, what Kaufmann calls a 'shame-based identity'.<sup>32</sup> These are cases, where the *affect* of disgrace-shame, often due to continuous instances of shaming in early childhood, turns into a more lasting *feeling* of shame, a feeling of constantly having to protect one's 'true' self from being exposed to others, lest others will discover one's true self and reject it. Basically, this shame is a life partner that tells the human person that one is an unlovable failure.

Each pastoral theologian has a different name for this aspect of the phenomenon of shame, the 'depleted self' (Capps); the 'shame-based identity' (Albers and Hunsinger); 'chronic shame' (Pattison); 'toxic shame' (McNish, Goodliff, Arel); 'graceless shame' (Okkenhaug); 'white shame' (Andersen); or 'destructive shame' (Farstad). This lasting feeling of shame constitutes a widespread existential issue that renders life unbearable, and they seek theological answers to it (instead of relying only on psychological tools). In what follows, I will analyze and develop some of the theological ideas that can be found in the theology of shame.

### ***Theologies of Worthiness and Recognition***

The most widespread idea in pastoral theology is to develop the view of God as the one who conveys worth and dignity to the human person. Creation theology is key to this approach. As Albers notes, God creates the human person as the child of God, and as such the human person is imbued with a worth which ought to be 'sufficient justification for your existence'.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Pattison notices how God repeatedly evaluates the creation of the world and humanity, as per Genesis Chapter 1: 'God blesses it and finds it good'.<sup>34</sup> Andersen focuses on the idea of being created in the image of God, which conveys a deep sense of worth to the human person.<sup>35</sup>

While creation theology imbues the human person with a sense of worth that belongs to them, the encounter with God is also relevant for healing shame. Albers quotes Tillich's understanding of grace as divine acceptance. For Tillich, and Albers, the whole point of the Lutheran doctrine of justification is to emphasize that God accepts the human person into the divine community. In this understanding, faith simply means accepting this divine acceptance of oneself.<sup>36</sup> Remarkably, however, Albers does not offer any Christological grounding to this point.

In a more Christologically-oriented framework, Capps borrows the concept of 'mirroring' from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. A positive mirroring takes place in the story of the female prostitute who anoints Jesus with oil and tears while he is eating with the Pharisees (Luke 7:36–50). Capps sees the encounter as a 'testimony' to how Jesus begins 'a new age in self-other relationships [...] based in a new kind of bonding that can be described

only as a bonding in *love*.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps for the first time in her life, this woman has experienced being seen and accepted instead of being neglected and abased.<sup>38</sup>

A third theologian, Leif Andersen, follows in the vein of German sociologist Axel Honneth by speaking of ‘recognition,’ which—if taken with the implication of a face to face, one person recognizing another—carries stronger connotations of proximity than the term ‘acceptance.’ Meditating on the 1470 Monforte altar piece by Hugo van der Goes, Andersen notices how the gaze of Christ in the crib is directed at the eyes of the observer. Andersen suggests that the gaze of Christ constitutes an act of recognition that not only counters gazes of shame from human adversaries, but also conveys value and worth to the life of the spectator.<sup>39</sup>

### *Theologies of Acknowledgement*

While the term ‘recognition’ may increase the proximity between the parties, it implies the face-to-face encounter that enables the exchange of glances. I would suggest following Danish theologian Niels Grønkjær in developing the concept of acknowledgment rather than recognition (*vedkendelse*, note the linguistic proximity to *anerkendelse*). While recognition entails an element of a charitable distance, acknowledgment implies being welcomed into a community that creates solidarity between the parties. Instead of standing face-to-face, acknowledgment implies standing side-by-side to face life together.<sup>40</sup> Acknowledgement goes a step further into a community of mutual commitment between the parties, thus enabling a deep sense of belonging for the shamed person.

Translating this idea into theology, I would suggest that God neither only accepts, nor only recognizes the human person. By becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, God becomes one amongst people. This move of incarnation involves an act of welcoming people into God’s domain. Simultaneously, the incarnation is a move into the lives of every human person, such that God stands in solidarity with the human person regardless of the shame that may be this person’s fate.<sup>41</sup>

Such an understanding of God resonates with the pastoral theologies that develop the topic of shame in their take on divine incarnation. As several pastoral theologians point out, shame is already a reality from the beginning of God’s incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus experienced dishonor in several ways, beginning with his mother’s shame of pregnancy outside of marriage, to the various aspects of shaming surrounding his passion (e.g. betrayal, mockery, public humiliation, crucifixion outside the city). This reality for Jesus Christ means that God understands and identifies with the shame that human beings may experience, such that human beings are not without God in their shame.<sup>42</sup>

A more Trinitarian understanding of the crucifixion with regards to shame can be found in Jamieson’s *The Face of Forgiveness*. The three divine persons experience the shame of the crucifixion, each in their unique way. This is evident in the cry of dereliction according to Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46), in which Jesus no longer uses the familiar word ‘Abba,’ but rather the more distanced word ‘God.’<sup>43</sup> The Father has abandoned the Son,<sup>44</sup> and the Son has lost his access to the Father. By this malaise the Holy Spirit is also wounded. ‘This is the eternal God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, experiencing and therefore redeeming the heart of human brokenness that is shame.’<sup>45</sup> Jamieson does not simply state that the divine experience of shame also redeems it. The relationship between the divine



persons is not restored from its shame until Jesus commends his spirit into the hands of God—a word of Jesus on the cross found in Luke (23:46)—thus overcoming the separation of shame.<sup>46</sup>

However, the separation is only overcome from the one side, namely from Jesus. By commending his spirit into the hands of God, the Son stands by the Father. For a more mutual overcoming of shame, I would also insist on developing the locus of the resurrection. By resurrecting the Son in the power of the Spirit, the Father finally shows Himself to be standing by the Son, covering the Son in the divine glory. Having thus overcome shame in a mutual effort between Father and Son in the power of the Spirit, a space has been opened for human beings to live within, a space in which no separation is allowed to appear (Romans 8:34–39).<sup>47</sup> The resurrection points towards a reality in which God is so tightly connected to the human person that nothing can ever come between them.

### Shame as an Opportunity to be Embraced

While the first group of theologians seeks to overcome the lasting and devastating shame, a smaller group of pastoral theologians discover a transformative power in the shame of disgrace. This allows for a theology that—under certain circumstances—implies the risk of shame, a theology that even encourages the human person to embrace shame. I now turn my attention thereto.

### *The Risk of Shame in Confrontations*

Inspired by Martin Buber, Neil Pembroke uses the concept of ‘confirmation’ to proceed beyond the theological insistence on acceptance. For Pembroke, confirmation is primarily a therapeutical concept, but I will reconstruct its theology through the bits and pieces that Pembroke offers.

While starting with the unconditional acceptance explored in the previous section, Pembroke argues that the concept of confirmation involves struggling with the other person. This seeks to transcend unconditional acceptance in two directions, both of which, I would argue, involve the risk of shame. First, accepting oneself fully—including those aspects of one’s identity that create shame—can require an external confrontation with one’s limited perspective. If one is constantly defending against even recognizing oneself because one is ashamed of oneself—say by turning every situation into a joke—a challenge to these defense mechanisms will be needed before one can come to accept oneself fully.<sup>48</sup> Second, ‘confirmation’ transcends acceptance because one may require an external confrontation in order to become the person one is created to be.<sup>49</sup> One ought not only accept oneself as that which one *is*; one also has to realize one’s potential to become the person one is created *to be*. To become open for such a transformative acceptance requires a struggle with one’s deep-seated assumptions about life, including false assumptions about ethics.

However—and Pembroke does not develop this in full—any external confrontation risks eliciting the shame of disgrace.<sup>50</sup> Consider the situation where another person confronts you with the moral insight that proudly proclaiming one’s accomplishments risks humiliating one’s listeners. One response to such a confrontation may simply be to appreciate the lesson being given and be transformed accordingly (cf. Proverbs 9:8).



Another response may be shame: How had I not realized that such behavior is really rather arrogant—am I really that insensitive? If shame occurs, it offers the possibility of repenting and changing one's behavior and life-orientation, thus turning the disgrace-shame into a sign of hope.<sup>51</sup> However, because transformation does not *require* shame on this view, Jamieson is able to emphasize that God is not actively shaming the human person to bring forward a transformation; rather, the transformative potential of shame bears witness to the conviction that 'God is able to work good in all circumstances,'<sup>52</sup> even in circumstances as troublesome as the experience of shame. Pembroke also sees God at work in such transformative processes. It is the Holy Spirit, not human powers, who is at work in sanctifying the human person towards becoming who one was created to be.<sup>53</sup>

The idea of confirmation as involving both an acceptance of the other and struggling with the other can find a more distinctly theological voice in Niels Henrik Gregersen's article *Guilt, Shame, and Rehabilitation: The Pedagogy of Divine Judgment*. For Gregersen, the gaze of God is first and last a reinstating force that heals the shame with which the human person is living. The gaze of God is an unconditional acceptance that takes away the threat of shame, namely the threat of rejection.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the gaze of God involves what Pembroke calls confirmation: a judgment directed at both sides of the power relationship of shame, both the shaming part and the shamed part. God passes judgment at external abasements (infringement on one's reputation) but also on the effect one allows it to have on oneself (concern with one's reputation). The reinstating force of God requires the human person to let 'God's gaze be the measure of one's self-evaluation.'<sup>55</sup> This involves an element of losing oneself (Luke 17:33), namely relativizing one's care for reputation and, instead, orienting oneself to God, who conveys divine glory upon the human person.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Transformative Potential in Toxic Shame**

It is one thing seeing the positive potential in the shame of disgrace. It is quite another thing to argue for the transformative potential in the deeper, lasting feeling of shame: toxic shame. Yet, this is the compelling ambition of Jill McNish.

McNish points out that shame belongs essentially to the human condition. Inevitably, she argues, shame arises with the realization that human beings are merely finite humans standing before the God who is the almighty Creator of the universe.<sup>57</sup> Shame belongs to human existence. If the human person acknowledges this reality, then the experience of shame holds a transformative potential. Daring to remain with the experience of shame can 'expand our relationship with ourselves with one another, and with God.'<sup>58</sup> Borrowing terms from William James, McNish argues that the 'healthy-minded' person goes through life feeling just alright. The 'sick soul,' however, who experiences shame deeply and abundantly, holds the potential for experiencing him or herself as 'held, embraced and contained by source and power of being.'<sup>59</sup> This experience requires the acceptance, recognition, and acknowledgment discussed above. In this process, the toxicity of shame is removed, for it has been embraced. McNish' theology still does not see shame as an obstacle to be removed. If one defends oneself against shame, one never gets in touch with the transformative potential of shame. Thereby, McNish finds a transformative beacon of hope for the human person who is confronted with the deepest darkness.

The problem, therefore, relates to the strategies human beings use to avoid shame when they are unable or unwilling to embrace it. Credit for lining up a series of strategies that people use to avoid shame goes to Gershen Kaufmann and his 1980 work *Shame: The Power of Caring*.<sup>60</sup> In Kaufmann's analysis, shame is so painful that people have developed an array of strategies to handle, avoid, or reject shame. Strategies against shame can be more defensive, aiming at avoidance, or more aggressive, seeking to transfer an already experienced shame to someone else. The list of strategies is this: Rage, contempt, striving for power or perfection, scapegoating, and internal withdrawal. These are psychological and existential mechanisms upon which theology has reflected for years, so it is little wonder that pastoral theologians have found a conversation partner here.<sup>61</sup>

For McNish, it is these strategies against shame that constitute the obstacle, not the shame itself. Defending against shame makes it impossible to experience the potential transformation that can arise around remaining with shame.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, McNish focuses her theological insight towards how the relationship of persons to their shame can change through Jesus Christ.

First, McNish explores the way in which the incarnate Christ remained in solidarity with those that were outcasts in his society. For McNish, the outcasts of the gospels are symbols, not only of contemporary outcasts, but also about what is outcast in each and every one of us.<sup>63</sup> The point must be to own not only one's good sides, but also those sides that are cast out, at least to such a degree that one dares place oneself fully before God. After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus says: 'Gather up the fragments so that nothing may be lost' (John 6:4-15).<sup>64</sup> For McNish, this becomes an invitation to embrace all aspects of one's self, even those that one has come to perceive as shameful. What the shamed person needs first and foremost is not to have one's shame countered with affirmations of one's worth—this contrasts starkly with both Pembroke's idea of confirmation as well as the theologians of worthiness that see shame itself as the problem! Rather, the shamed person needs an affirmation of his or her experience of being ashamed. In this vein, Gershen Kaufmann suggests that 'Shame has to be actively approached, not avoided or denied [...] "Yes, I see your shame, your feelings of stupidity and worthlessness, and I'm neither afraid nor ashamed to approach."' <sup>65</sup> In a theological tenor, the point to convey is that 'God knows they are ashamed and that, in the words of Isaiah 30:18, God "waits to be gracious" to them,' as McNish puts it.<sup>66</sup>

Second, the story of the passion of Jesus becomes an example of owning one's shame. Christ constitutes a paradigm of transforming shame. Christ owned his shame, not using any defenses, was resurrected, and experienced unity with God.<sup>67</sup> The point of this theology of shame is that, rather than removing the shame, God bears the shame together with human beings, thus enabling human beings to live with their shame. As such, the theology of transformative shame emphasizes that hope lies within even the most toxic experience of shame.

In much the same vein as McNish, Stephanie Arel argues that shame has to be unearthed and accepted rather than being either interred or combatted. In a theological move unique to the field, Arel points to the transformative experience of Ash Wednesday, which involves the haptic ritual of marking a cross of ashes on the forehead. This is a sign of both repentance and traumatic suffering—a sign of shame. As Arel notes: 'only through further exposure, turning to the other or to God in shame, only through facing the shame in reconnection with another, does repair occur.'<sup>68</sup> For making this point, she

draws upon Augustine who states that “In no secret place do I keep the Cross of Christ, but bear it on my forehead,” “because the forehead is the seat of the blush of shame.”<sup>69</sup> This liturgical tradition is capable of stirring and thereby confronting the shame that derives from the touch of dominance (e.g. sexual abuse, or police frisking) or the absence of touch (e.g. abandonment). While the symbol of the ash cross is a mark of shame, it avoids the toxicity of shame by being acknowledged and enveloped with the cross of Christ, by being set within a liturgical community, and by pointing towards the resurrection on Easter Sunday.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored pastoral theologies of shame with respect to the question of the normativity of shame. In my evaluation, the pastoral theology of shame needs to be firmly grounded in the majority position that sees shame as an obstacle to be removed, and sees acceptance, recognition, and acknowledgement as the divine response. But the minority position offers two crucial nuances. First, if shame can also arise with a problematic concern for one’s own reputation, the symbol of the divine judgment has to do its work: God is God and therefore the one who determines the ultimate shame and glory in human lives, not the outer world, nor oneself. Second, the observation that shame entails a transformative potential towards experiencing the deep, divine relationality in the Holy Spirit, creates a hope even for those suffering from the deepest shame. How these nuances pertain to the liberation theology that addresses shame from social stigmatization remains an area for further research.

What is most surprising in pastoral theology of shame is the distinct lack of theological consideration of the ‘shame of discretion.’ After all, shame plays a significant role in human morality, aiding human beings in orienting themselves in social space. The shame of discretion upholds relationships, allowing mutual trust to develop between the parties before one, if ever, lets down one’s guard and allows the other person into the more shameful aspects of one’s existence.

As mentioned, pastoral theologians note this discretionary aspect of shame, and some even make theological-ethical arguments about how discretionary shame functions in human sexuality<sup>70</sup> or in the context of counseling.<sup>71</sup> However, none of the authors offer *theological* interpretations of the phenomenon of discretionary shame.

Inspiration for such a move could lie in Genesis 3. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve become ashamed of their nakedness, and God expels them from the Garden of Eden to stop them from also eating from the tree of eternal life. But before sending them away, God sews them proper clothing to wear instead of their fig leaves. This gesture is open for the metaphorical interpretation that God clothes the naked and vulnerable human beings with a sense of discretionary shame that guards their own sense of privacy and functions as a guide towards the boundaries of others. Future research calls for more consideration of this aspect of the theology of shame.

## Notes

1. Capps, *The Depleted Self*; Albers, *Shame*; Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*; Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*.

2. This overview of books does not include several articles written on the subject. In the *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, Brad Binau has contributed with “When Shame Is the Question, How Does the Atonement Answer” from 2002.
3. Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*; McNish, *Transforming Shame*; Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face*; Okkenhaug, *Når jeg skjuler mitt ansikt*; Strodmeyer, *Scham und Erlösung*; Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*; Farstad, *Skam*; Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*; Arel, *Affect Theory, Shame, and Christian Formation*. Three limitations to this study should be noted. I exclude pastoral theologians who only make a brief notice of shame, e.g. Klessmann, *Seelsorge*, 231–34. I leave out also those pastoral theologians who deal with shame pastorally within a purely therapeutic framework, see e.g. Fechtner, *Diskretes Christentum*, 146–60. Finally, the overview applies to literature written in English, German, and the Nordic languages.
4. Pattison, *Shame*, 189–228.
5. Remarkably, pastoral theologians contributing to the field only refer to selections of previous research, sometimes even very small selections. For documentation, please contact the author.
6. Rather than, say, providing a chronological account of the field.
7. See, for example, Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*. I place quotation marks around ‘culture of shame’ as a sign of distance to the cultural reductionism that is behind the undialectical use of this term.
8. Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall*; Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*; Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2*.
9. Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*; *From Hurt to Healing*, and *Triune Atonement*; Gregersen, “Guilt, Shame, and Rehabilitation”; Bammel, *Aufgetane Augen - Aufgedecktes Angesicht*; Stump, *Atonement*.
10. See Gautier, “Als Beschämte.”
11. Huizinga, *Scham und Ehre*.
12. Haas, *Das Phänomen Scham*.
13. Notably, historical research paints a nuanced picture of the relationship between theology and shame, see Burrus, *Saving Shame* (on the early church), Behrens, *Scham* (on medieval England), and the references given by Pattison, *Shame*, 229–230, who then goes on to explore in detail how the church has exploited shame as a tool for discipline.
14. Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 129; Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 3; Albers, *Shame*, 3; Pattison, *Shame*, 245; McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 6; Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face*, ix; Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 223; Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*, 21; Arel, *Affect Theory*, 4. See also Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*, 113.
15. Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, 131.
16. Piers, “Shame and Guilt,” 24. See also Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem,” 225; Tangney and Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*, 13.
17. Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*, 23–30.
18. Kaufman, *Shame*, 132.
19. Andersen is the only theologian in the field who emphasizes that guilt can also describe the human person, Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 252. In a brief interview on January 10, 2020, Andersen clarified the insight behind this statement: What life demands of human beings is not only actions, but also a certain form of being. After all, the demand to love both neighbor and God requires the whole person, not only one’s actions. Failing to love means that the very person is in a state of guilt (Psalm 51:7).
20. Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 86.
21. Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*, 62.
22. Farstad is also concerned with images of God. However, in contrast to Hunsinger, her approach to unhealthy and healthy images of God remains in a third-person language that is closer to the psychology of religion than theology, Farstad, *Skam*, 246–57.
23. Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*, 200 with reference to Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2*, 430.
24. Without referencing Hunsinger, Andersen proposes the similar argument that shame *can* be healed through psychological means alone, while guilt *requires* theology. Andersen, however,

does develop a theology for those wounded by shame, Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 248-249.

25. Metz, "Suffering unto God."
26. Hunsinger, *Bearing the Unbearable*, 7.
27. *Ibid.*, 37.
28. *Ibid.*, 90.
29. Slenczka, "Communicatio Idiomatum."
30. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*, 18-28.
31. Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 40; Albers, *Shame*, 7-15; Pattison, *Shame*, 80; McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 133-34. See also Binau, "When Shame Is the Question," 94.
32. Kaufman, *Shame*, 120. Albers uses this concept without referencing Kaufman.
33. Albers, *Shame*, 101.
34. Pattison, *Shame*, 301.
35. Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 252.
36. Albers, *Shame*, 97. Notably, Albers leaves out the rest of the formulation in Tillich, namely that grace is about acceptance of the person who is *unacceptable* according to the criteria of the Law, Tillich, *ST III*, 224-25.
37. Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 165, compare also Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*, 74-78; Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face*, 73-77. For a similar approach without reference to the Kohut, see the interpretation of the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) in Pattison, *Shame*, 307-8.
38. Pembroke issued a respectfully critical remark against Capps' understanding of sin simply as the shame of being victimized, Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 199.
39. Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 251-52. For Okkenhaug, recognition is also a brief concern, but she is more inspired by liberation theologians for whom God raises up the downtrodden from their humiliated and shamed position on the ground such that they can demand justice and recognition, Okkenhaug, *Når jeg skjuler mitt ansikt*, 133.
40. Grønkjær, *Det nye menneske*, 287. Grønkjær owes much of his development of the concept of acknowledgment to Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 35-38. However, for Markell, the object of acknowledgement is the human condition of finitude, not the other person.
41. For further exploration of this point, see Christoffersen, "The Gaze of God."
42. Albers, *Shame*, 104, see also Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*, 38-39; McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 9-16; Okkenhaug, *Når jeg skjuler mitt ansikt*, 99-104; Andersen, *Sjælesorgens samtale*, 253-54. In contrast, Capps explicitly focuses on Jesus' internal shame rather than the external shaming, Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 99.
43. Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*, 99.
44. In contrast to the view that Jesus had actually been abandoned, Albers and McNish agree that Jesus rather *felt* abandoned, see Albers, *Shame*, 104; McNish, *Transforming*, 171.
45. Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*, 97.
46. *Ibid.*, 101.
47. See also Binau, "When Shame Is the Question," 108; Wagner-Rau, "Scham," 197.
48. Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 97.
49. *Ibid.*, 111.
50. Compare Pembroke's interpretation of the biblical story of Jonah, Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 99 with that of Capps, *The Depleted Self*, 157.
51. Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*, 58. See also Binau, "When Shame Is the Question," 94; Wagner-Rau, "Scham," 190.
52. Jamieson, *The Face of Forgiveness*, 59.
53. Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 104.
54. Compare Hovland, "Du med nåden," 62.
55. Gregersen, "Guilt, Shame, and Rehabilitation," 111.
56. *Ibid.*, 113.
57. McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 75, see also Albers, *Shame*, 11. McNish criticizes Pattison for reducing God to an overly nice, pleasant and accommodating figure in his effort to remove all shame

from the relationship to the divine, McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 178. Whether McNish is right that finitude entails shame is a matter of dispute. Compare Way, *Created by God*, 19.

58. McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 52.
59. *Ibid.*, 177.
60. Patton, Is Human Forgiveness Possible?, 65–92; Capps, The Depleted Self, 95; Albers, Shame, 69–84; Hunsinger, Theology and Pastoral Counseling, 179; Pattison, Shame, 111; McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 53–62; Farstad, Skam, 72–76; Jamieson, The Face of Forgiveness, 65–66.
61. Compared with Kaufman, Patton changes the categories a bit, Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* 65–92. Albers adds a particularly Christian problem, namely the martyr-complex: portraying oneself as one who deserves nothing helps one defend against the shame of others; I have already done the work of shaming myself, Albers, *Shame*, 79–80. McNish adds shamelessness to the list: Behaving shamelessly is an attempt live as though the shaming eyes were not there, McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 176.
62. *Ibid.*, 61.
63. *Ibid.*, 166.
64. *Ibid.*, 168.
65. Kaufman, *Shame*, 143–44.
66. McNish, *Transforming Shame*, 185.
67. *Ibid.*, 169.
68. Arel, *Affect Theory*, 177.
69. *Ibid.*, 151 with reference to Augustine's *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*.
70. Goodliff, *With Unveiled Face*, 55.
71. Pembroke, *The Art of Listening*, 202–5.

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